

## Things Stranger Than Reality by Kitty\_KatAllie

**Category:** Star Wars - All Media Types, Star Wars Original Trilogy, Stranger Things (TV 2016), The Mandalorian (TV)

**Genre:** Also Rated M for language smoking and more language, Basic Stranger Things Plot and THAT'S IT, Eleven | The Kid | Grogu, Ex-Marine Luke Skywalker, F/F, F/M, Friends to Lovers, M for Monsters and Murder, M/M, Sequel Trilogy Teenagers, Slow Burn, nonverbal grogu, sheriff din djarin

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Ben Solo, Cara Dune, Din Djarin, Finn (Star Wars), Han Solo, Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker, Poe Dameron, Rey (Star Wars), Rose Tico, a bunch of star wars characters from all over the place

**Relationships:** Din Djarin & Grogu | Baby Yoda, Din Djarin/Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa/Han Solo, Poe Dameron/Finn, Rey/Rose Tico

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2021-02-22

**Updated:** 2021-06-21

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 13:54:08

**Rating:** Mature

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 6

**Words:** 73,960

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Nothing happens in Hawkins, Indiana. It's one of the reasons why Paige and Rose Tico moved across the country from California. But one early Monday morning, at exactly 3:42 AM, something even worse than Oakland's everyday violence began to hunt through the shadows of that sleepy, safe, little town. And Rey's the only one who knows.

In the same town, the too-tired Sheriff Djarin has had enough to deal with. Emergency calls about power outs, conspiracy theories about military experiments at the town lab, and a war vet with a too pretty smile and great coffee took all of Din's time. He never thought life would change, each moment routine and numbing while his past mistakes haunted him. Until a combination of mysterious murders,

disappearances, and reports of a wild feral child in the woods turned his life upside down. Perhaps he should've listened to Skywalker's wild theories a little sooner...

# 1. Prologue

## Author's Note:

Inspired by a post by [julchenawesome!](#) See it [here](#)  
Look, it's happening!!

The first chapter was just too damn long. So. I made some of it a prologue! Hoping y'all feel that first five minutes before the title card vibe~ Also, I've never written horror genre before. I hope it works out!

Warning: I *\*am\** using most of the actual plot of the first season of ST. The characters themselves are vastly different from the show (Din and Grogu are the most like their show counterparts), but anything else is basically spoilers for season 1.

There was a delicious thrill at sliding out of Poe's red-orange Sunbird when the whole town was asleep. The dingy little trailer park looked almost ethereal when the only light came from a single street lamp casting a buttery pumpkin orange light over everything. Rose grinned, feeling a little wild and wide-eyed, as Rey slid over the back of the convertible and landed neatly on her toes beside Rose. Finn was still snoring in his awkwardly twisted position in the passenger seat while Poe in the driver's seat shook Finn gently.

"So, you glad you played delinquent with us on a *school* night?" Rey whispered, leaning in close enough Rose could feel the warmth of her body. They had spent the entire drive from Indianapolis curled up in the backseat, the autumn wind dragging through their hair and goosebumps puckering any bare bit of skin. Rey leaning so close shouldn't make Rose's cheeks heat *now*.

"Yeah, yeah, you were right. It was fun," Rose agreed, laughing softly and nudging Rey away. Rey fake-cringed, clutching at the ribs Rose just elbowed, and winked. Rose only rolled her eyes and leaned on the door next to Finn. Who was finally blinking and yawning awake.

"You coming out of there any time soon? It's past three. I'm pretty sure Poe wants to get *some* sleep tonight, ball chaser."

"mcomin," Finn slurred, rubbing at his face. He squinted at her teasing smile. "Not a ball chaser. *Poe's* a ball chaser."

"Only every day of the week. That's kinda my job as the school's star forward." The other three all groaned at Poe's customary bragging. "I'm doing fine. No rush. Do you need me to help you home, Finn?" Poe asked, smiling at Finn's bleary glare.

"Oh, we're back?" He broke off with yet another yawn. Rey rolled her eyes and Rose snickered.

"You're definitely holding up better than this guy," Rey muttered to Rose. She moved Rose out of the way to open the car door herself and drag a sleepily protesting Finn out. "Don't baby him, Poe. See ya in three hours?"

"I'll bring enough coffee for everyone," Poe promised, his roguishly charming smile slanting over his face. For every dumb jock brag, there was a moment like *that* and it made Rose remember why they all liked him despite his popularity and big head.

"Thank you," Rose said fervently.

She had a Calc test in third period and there would be *no way* she would pass it without coffee. Especially *Poe's* coffee that he made strong enough to burn a hole through her stomach lining. He gave her a wink as if reading her mind, then glanced in concern at Finn, whose arm was now wrapped around Rey's shoulders, before finally driving off. The three friends watched his taillights disappear into the dark. The silence was interrupted by Rey's yawn this time, and Rose quickly ducked under Finn's other arm to help her hold him up.

"Ah, c'mon, I'm not *that* sleepy. I got this," Finn whined even as he grinned at both of them.

"Your house is first, ball chaser. 'S no problem," Rey teased. Finn laughed, and the three of them stumbled and giggled their way through the quiet park towards the farthest side.

Rey and Finn lived right next door, their almost identically rundown and dingy vinyl-sided trailer homes barely an arm's span apart. Their entire lives they had lived next door, playing in the dirt and astroturf in hand-me-down sneakers and shapeless Goodwill shirts. They hadn't even known how odd it was for a white girl and a black boy to be so close that they could all but read each other's minds until they'd gotten into public school where the students all naturally segregated themselves in a podunk town like *Hawkins*. Luckily, by the time Rose had moved into town in her freshman year of high school, most of that kind of thinking was covered up and everyone pretended like it had never happened. Nah, good old-fashioned classism had shunted them off into the 'poor kids' group instead. No one wanted to be friends with the trailer park kids, except for other trailer park kids and, mindbogglingly, *Poe*.

Just last year, Poe Dameron, high school basketball and soccer ace, somehow joined them, smiling his suave 'cool kid' smile at Finn's side, driving his 'rich kid' Sunbird up to invite Finn and his trailer park friends to hop in and get milkshakes at Cantina Pizzeria. Sure, Finn had joined basketball and baseball and was getting to know those jerk jocks, but none of them had really given Finn the time of day regardless of his talent. Until Poe had. And then refused to leave Finn's side ever since.

And now, here Rose was. The Asian nerd with rock band posters on her wall, creeping home at three in the morning on a *Sunday*... well, Monday. After going to a *rock concert* in Indianapolis almost four hours away with actual best friends. They'd had to miss the last few sets, but Rose was thrumming with adrenaline, the bass from the stage amps still buzzing in her ears. They hadn't even been that famous, but she and Rey made it a habit to listen to as many new bands as possible. You never know who's gonna be the next The Clash.

They made it to Finn's house first, and he wobbled his way up the rickety, hollow-metal porch. With a short wave, Finn slunk into his house leaving Rose and Rey alone under the lamp post.

It flickered over their heads and Rey frowned up at it.

"Didn't they just fix that?" she muttered, rubbing her arms.

“Well, you know Hawkins. Probably didn’t waste a lot of money on it,” Rose said with a shrug. “Probably took it from a bin of used bulbs.” She shoved her hands deep in her jacket pockets and realized it was Rey’s hard-earned bomber jacket. She had forgotten that Rey had put it on her at about hour two on the freeway. She moved to take it off, but Rey quickly brushed her hands away and resettled it on Rose’s shoulders.

“Give it back in the morning. You still gotta walk home,” Rey whispered, her green eyes looking soft in the low, orange light. Rose ducked her head to hide what was probably a dopey smile.

“It’s two minutes around the corner,” Rose protested halfheartedly, tucking her nose under the collar of the jacket. It smelled like old, used leather and Rey’s off-brand shampoo, and it probably shouldn’t make her feel *this* warm. It wasn’t like it was brand new or had great insulation.

“Still two minutes more’n me. I can, um, walk you? To yours?” Rey offered. Her eyes were on her feet, taped together combat boots scuffling the pavement.

“*Rey*,” Rose said on a laugh. “It’s *less* than two minutes. And this is *Hawkins*, not Oakland.”

“Yeah, yeah, city girl, nothing happens in Hawkins,” Rey said.

Their eyes met again and Rose wasn’t sure what was happening to her own face, but Rey’s expression, as unreadable as it was, had Rose’s heart thumping double-time. She looked so pretty with her silky brown hair tangled all around her face, the droop of her sleepy dark eyes, and the cute little arch her left eyebrow always had. Rose really needed to stop filing away all those quirks of Rey’s face like some sort of creep. The street lamp overhead flickered again, breaking their silent gaze when they reflexively looked up.

“You should, um, get going. Before it goes out. We’re barely gonna have enough time for nap, anyway,” Rey pointed out, clearing her throat lightly and staring off to the side.

“Um, yeah,” Rose muttered, cheeks hot. She turned on her heel

quickly and began to not run walk quickly away.

“Hey, Rose?” She looked over her shoulder to see Rey standing under the beam of orange light. “Walkie me when you get home, okay? I won’t go to bed until you do.”

Rose grinned and shook her head. She jogged towards home as the light flickered again.

By the time she turned down the path towards her trailer, way at the farthest edge of the park and out of Rey’s sight, the light was blinking almost nonstop. It was dumb, so dumb, but her heart was beating faster, her pace picking up. Suddenly, without Finn or Rey, the shadows seemed darker, almost dangerous. She gasped and stumbled to a stop, eyes wide and hands shaking. There, outside the park’s chain link fence, she’d seen... no. This was *Hawkins*. She and Paige left California behind, found this tiny sleepy town in the middle of nowhere Indiana, to be as safe as possible. Paige had been barely nineteen and Rose fifteen at the time. The idea of sticking around that city after their parents... after all the violence there had taken their parents away from them so suddenly, it had been impossible and terrifying. Nothing happened *here*. There weren’t any random... people stalking around the trailer park at 3 AM.

But her breath was catching and the light was flickering faster, the blackouts lasting longer and longer. She started hurrying home again, breath panting harshly between her gritted teeth as the shadowy figure all but zipped past her peripheral. The keys in her hand jangled and her heart thudded so hard against her sternum she thought the bone would crack. Leaves shuffled, but there wasn’t any wind. She flung herself into her house at the same time the whole park was plunged into darkness.

Paige was working the graveyard shift, it was one of the reasons why Rose agreed to sneak out to the city that night; she would be able to avoid her sister’s overzealous protectiveness. At the time, it was exciting and *daring*. Making Rey grin like Rose was some kind of brave ‘troublemaker’ had been enough reason to say “yes” and not feel the least guilty about using Paige’s overworked schedule to her own advantage. Now, the emptiness of her crummy little house was ominous. Too big and too small and too dark. She leaned back

against her door, breath shuddering past her trembling lips, keys hanging from her fingers. The walkietalkie she'd tossed onto the couch before racing out to meet Rey and Finn was easy enough to find as she shook her head and tried to laugh off the ridiculous fear.

Rose heard it then and her grip almost cracked the plastic in her hand.

The low rumbling growl.

It sent every nerve in her body into flight or fight. Or *both*, as she raced over threadbare carpet to the back room. To the little safe under Paige's bed. She flung herself to the floor, dragged it out, and, with shaking fingers, rolled the lock open on muscle memory. Inside were birth certificates and immunization cards and security number cards. Obits from the Oakland newspaper with her parents' names at the top and sepia-toned wedding pictures under that. Most importantly, the coolly alien feel of rough plastic met her fingertips. The too smooth metal of a snub-nosed barrel. She shoved the walkietalkie into the bomber jacket pocket as she backed into a sitting position.

Her eyes were wide, so wide they stung, but it was so dark that she had to pop out the chamber blindly. The small, mostly-full box rattled, but she managed to slip six small bullets into each hole and set the chamber back in place. The safety latch clicked under her thumb.

For long painstaking moments there was only silence and her own harsh breaths echoing in the heavy darkness of her sister's bedroom. Then, her heart stopped. Her whole body quivered with the need to run. She could only scooch back on her ass, jeans rasping over the carpet until her back hit the fake wood panelling of the wall.

The shadows in the corner of the room were jerking and twisting to form a gruesome shape that crawled like an animal over the floor. Then rose, rose, rose, tall enough to be a man but *wrong*. Her mind was screaming as tears burned down her face and her arms raised. The hammer pulled back under her thumbs more easily than it ever had the few times her sister had made her practice.



They should've stayed in Oakland.

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Metal dug into knees. Soft hands scraped over various unseen debris. Water, slimy and smelly, splashed against skin.

He was cold. Colder than he had ever been.

He tumbled out of the little hole in the ground, shivering harder when wind slapped against every bit of bare skin. There was a lot of it.

For a brief moment, he stood there. Huddled into himself, bony arms wrapped tight around his stomach, skin bumpy and the tiny, almost invisible hairs on his limbs standing straight up.

Around him was... big.

So big.

Nothing but the bloody gown he wore was white. Everything was black. Dark. The ceiling was high, so high he couldn't see the corners, and little dots and one big spot were glowing overhead.

Stars. Moon. He'd only seen them in pictures before.

He stepped forward. Beneath his bare foot it squished and crunched. Mud. Leaves. He crouched down and poked at the strange floor, eyes wide as wind scattered the brown leaves. Dead dead dead, the leaves were dead. But it smelled good. He wanted to press his nose into the floor and breathe in the smell of it all, the mud and leaves and *air*. But he was staring at the dead leaves, unable to look away.

Like the man in the room. Blood had been everywhere. There was still screaming in there, behind him. There was a loud terrifying *crack*, a *raprapraprap*. Guns.

He looked behind him. Saw the lights flickering.

Heard the *roar*.

He started running. The mud became dirt and it was easier to run, he didn't slip so much. His breath wheezed past his teeth and his chest insides *hurt*. But he didn't stop running.

It was coming.

He let it out. He let the monster *out*.

He was crying. He could feel the tears burning down his face, blurring his vision, but he didn't stop running.

## 2. Monday

### Summary for the Chapter:

It didn't feel right to be here. Kuiil was in the fucking morgue, there was a teenage girl (with a gun) missing, and a tiny nonverbal kid running hungry and barely dressed in the woods. And he was coming home in time for pizza and beer. Maybe Luke wouldn't mind digging out some flashlights and going searching again?

### Notes for the Chapter:

Edit: Moved the trigger warnings here So dumb putting them at the bottom only... wow.

Warnings: lots of gun talk, and mildly descriptive imagery of blood and ... murder? death. Warnings for death. Some less than PC/ableist remarks about Luke's mental health.

*Crack!*

*Crack!*

Rey sat up, eyes blinking away sleep as her half-doze ended abruptly. Everything was utterly black. The only noise was the quiet *shuushing* of the walkietalkie loosely hanging from her fingers on the bedspread.

But that... that sound that woke her... that was a *gun*... right?

Rey rubbed at her eye and squinted over at her alarm, barely able to read it in the moonlight. 3:42. She raised her walkie to her mouth.

"Rose? Rose, did you make it home?" Rey released the button, but the only reply she got was more white noise. She frowned and

pressed down again. “Rose, did you hear that? Was that... was that from over by you? Rose?”

Again, only the *sssshhhh* of radio static replied. Rey changed the channel, heart squeezing too tight.

“Finn? FINN! Wake up!” Of course his walkie was off. With a scoff, Rey got to her feet to scramble for her flashlight. It clattered to the ground and she fumbled around until she got it up and pointed at her window. She turned it off and on rapidly, aiming exactly where Finn’s stupid sleeping face would be. She saw shadows flailing in the dim starlight across the little astroturf area between their windows.

“WHAT!” Finn cried through the walkie. She could see his silhouette in his window now, running his hand over short buzzed hair.

“There was a gun! I heard it!” Rey snapped back.

More *sssshhhh*. Then, “Rey, what are you talking about?”

“The *gun*! It came from Rose’s. I *know* I heard a gun and it came from that way and she hasn’t walkie’d me like she promised.”

She trembled all over, heart thudding painfully. Something was wrong. Rose was *in trouble*. There had been *gun shots*!

“Rey... there weren’t any guns. I didn’t hear anything.”

“Yeah, well, you were probably already asleep.”

“I don’t think I’d sleep through *gunshots*, Rey. Maybe *you* were asleep.”

“I was *not*. Why hasn’t Rose walkie’d me!?”

“Because *she’s* probably asleep. It’s, like, maybe four in the morning. ...hey, is your clock working? My light isn’t working, either.”

Rey hurried over to her door, stubbing her toe on her bedframe and cussing a bluestreak under her breath. The Old Guy slept like the dead, luckily, so she doubted he’d wake up, but she still stopped to hold her breath and listen. She flipped her light switch... then flipped

it again. Then, a couple more times. That sickening gross feeling clawed at her guts as the light stayed resolutely off. She licked her lips nervously before crawling over her bed to squint at the alarm clock once more.

“Y-yeah, mine’s not, either. My clock’s stuck at 3:42.”

“Mine’s digital, so who knows what time it is now. Damn it, how are we supposed to get up for school?”

“Finn! That’s kinda *not important* right now. Do you remember the *gunshots* and Rose!?”

*Ssshhhh* And then, “Rey, I’m sure there weren’t any gunshots. If your flashlight woke me up, gunshots definitely would.”

Rey curled up on her bed and pressed the hard plastic corner against her forehead. Another swift lick over chapped lips. “You sure?” she whispered.

“Yeah, Rey, I’m sure.”

Lights flickered and suddenly she blinded all over again. She groaned and dragged herself over to the wall to turn her light back off. Meanwhile, Finn was muttering about the time and his watch.

“It’s already 4 o’clock. I’ll wake you up in time for school and we’ll go get Rose together, all right?”

Rey slumped against her headboard. Outside no one was moving around or calling out. If there *had* been gunshots, someone else would’ve heard them, too. She pressed down on the talk button. “All right.”

“Get some sleep, Rey. This is Hawkins, remember?”

“Right.” She exhaled roughly through her nose, not quite a laugh. Her walkie shut off and she slowly, reluctantly, set it down next to the clock.

Sleep didn't really happen, though. More like a light doze teasing sleep until she heard the echo of a shot, a tinny whisper of a scream: *Rey!* And then her eyes would creak open and stare at the street lamp outside, her tongue heavy and her heart a stone. When her clock clicked over to 6:12, she was dressed and ready for the day, hands clasped between her knees and eyes dry and itchy. The entire time, until the sky had lightened to pearly grey, the street light had remained a steady, constant beam. The moment she saw Finn leave his house, Rey grabbed her bag from the floor and slammed out of her room.

From the ratty recliner under a mound of afghans and a tray covered in hospital-esque food, her grandfather wheezed.

"Young ladies do *not* slam doors—" he began in his annoyingly condescending whisper of a voice.

"Okay, bye, I'm going to school."

"It's not with those *miscreants*—"

"Oh no, I definitely found a *bunch* of brand new friends, all of them Stepford perfect girls," Rey sassed with an eyeroll, already yanking open the door. Before her decrepit old grandfather could wheeze worse things past his withered lips, Rey was out the door. And slamming it behind her for good measure, grinning joylessly. She jumped off the side of the porch—it didn't have a railing, so wasn't exactly a *feat*—and ran over to Finn.

"You know Poe isn't even here yet, right?" Finn said with a yawn. He handed over a piece of toast dripping in Smucker's grape jelly. The one he kept for himself was more peanut butter than bread and Rey scowled in distaste just looking at it.

"Yeah, and you know who *else* isn't here? Rose. Let's go," Rey said around the first mouthful. It stuck like glue (or like peanut butter) in her throat, but she forced it down and dragged Finn through the park behind her.

"Whoa, Rey, c'mon, slow down, I'm gonna drop my breakfast."

“You know Mom will just make you another,” Rey said absently, heart thudding and jelly smearing over her fingers.

“Yeah, but she’ll give me a *lecture* about wasting food first.”

“Oh horror of horrors.” She stomped up the steps to Rose’s door, Finn hard on her heels, and all but fell through the unlocked door.

It was empty. And silent. She ran through the house, but nothing looked too weird. Rose’s bed was always sloppily unmade and for some reason Paige’s door was left open a bit, but there weren’t any messes. She even peeked through the cracked door, ignoring Finn’s hissed warnings, but only saw some boxes sticking out from under the bed. Nothing else.

Finn grabbed her arm before she could barge in—*nicely, barge in nicely*. “Paige will *kill* you if you sneak in there. Look they’re both not here, right? Paige probably drove her to school already. Rose might’ve got caught sneaking back in last night. You know how Paige gets. She’ll be grounded for a month.”

Rey scowled at him, but... it made sense. Why Rose didn’t walkie or wait for them and Poe, and it even explained why both sisters were gone. Rose had said Paige would be working past 6 AM, but she *had* come home early in the past. Rey shoved the rest of the soggy toast in her mouth, grimacing as she choked down what tasted like sweet, wet sand. Finn dragged her out the door towards the trailer park entrance. As she slipped into Poe’s backseat and took the thermos he handed back, she couldn’t help but stare into the rows and rows of boxy, dingy homes. Something was still... still niggling at the edge of her mind.

The door... She realized as coffee burned in her belly and Hawkins High loomed in front of them. The front door had been unlocked.

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Waking up was a struggle on the best of days. Today, assuredly not a

best of days, it clung to his eyes and limbs like thick, clinging webs. His back ached, his neck ached, good *God*, his eyeballs ached. Although, that was probably the early morning light searing through his eyelids. Groaning and spine cracking, Din sat up on his equally groaning and lumpy couch. He rubbed roughly callused hands over his face, wondering for the fourth day in a row if it were worth the time to shave. It wasn't like he was all that good at growing anything too bushy. His thumb ruffled the patch of facial hair along his jaw as his bleary eyes roved over the coffee table in front of him.

He would never hear the end of it if anyone at the station found out he passed out on his couch again.

*Don't you hurt yourself enough running after all those bad guys, Djarin? Aren't you too old for falling asleep any time and anywhere you lift your feet? I'm too old for that and I'm a spring chicken compared to you, Sheriff.*

Din groaned again. Didn't he deal with that guy enough without his voice in his head? He pushed himself to his feet and started stripping off yesterday's overly wrinkled uniform. If he didn't have another one here, there would be a spare at the office. Iggy, the office assistant more efficient than five employees combined, always made sure of that.

He shuffled his way towards the tiny, poorly lit bathroom over thin, creaking floors. He barely recognized that man staring wearily back at him. After three years, he thought his shit would be back together. That he would find a routine and learn how to feel real again.

Instead that stranger's face stared back, features blurred by watermarks on glass and nearsightedness.

His morning routine was a five minute shower that barely had enough time to warm up and a tooth brushing he barely remembered if it weren't for the foul morning taste being replaced by overly fake mint taste. No, he didn't shave today either. His clothes were thrown into a mostly full hamper and his sheriff khakis and plain white tee were replaced with more sheriff khakis and a plain white tee. After he pulled on a new pair of socks, he paused to stare at his unused bed. He couldn't remember the last time he slept there. His pillow



wasn't dented and his covers were laid out pin neat and barely ruffled from him sitting at the edge.

There was that voice in his head again, teasing and concerned. He leaned over to sigh into his hands. Maybe next year this date wouldn't hurt so bad. Maybe next year he wouldn't mourn something that wasn't even dead. Just not his anymore. Maybe next year waking in his silent house wouldn't be so deafening.

The mockingly empty bed was left behind and he was in the kitchen, drinking the last of the milk out of the carton and writing it on his grocery list. He had gotten a bit behind, but he could catch up easily. There wasn't any bread for toast, and the sight of Eggos he *definitely* didn't buy sitting in his freezer had his lips twitching upwards before he closed the door. The spring chicken could eat them the next time he kicked Din off his own couch for the night. He grabbed a bag of jerky out of a cabinet instead and then froze, hands on his keys, when he noticed a bunch of bananas on the counter. There weren't too many brown spots... but when the hell did he buy those? Did they arrive with the Eggos?

Din rolled his eyes upwards and heaved a sigh, then snagged a banana before stomping out his front door.

His mobile home was pretty far out of town, pretty far from anyone really. It was set back into the woods that surrounded Hawkins, and the driveway was more like an extended side road until he bumped and rolled onto the main road into town. Main Street was filled with teens on bikes and the everyday business folk headed to work. A few of them waved and smiled, and he nodded back. Most of them were waving because they'd known him as a child rather than because of the Sheriff's wagon he hauled around. He had only been back for three years and they'd already folded him right back in, as if he had never left for the big city twenty years ago.

He walked into the sheriff's station a mere fifteen minutes after leaving home. The hum of voices, Iggy's ever present typing, the ringing of the dispatch line... for a moment it felt like he missed a step; a tiny, almost imperceptible lurch in his stomach. And then that familiar laugh rang out and the missing step was under his foot. Deputy Dune left his office just then and smirked at him.

“Well, don’t you look like something the cat dragged in. Is that a pillow crease or a couch imprint on your face, boss?”

Din's eyes darted towards the office before he glowered at her. Dune laughed, hard enough her shoulders shook, and walked past him. Din continued to frown at her back, striding through his office door. The source of the earlier laughter was perched on the edge of his desk, slim hips in tattered jeans and an overly baggy and sun-faded Beatles tee hanging from deceptively narrow shoulders. 'Deceptively' because Din had seen this scruffy and slender thirty-something throw a drunk twice his size over a knee with one hand.

Not that you would ever tell with that boyishly charming smile lighting up the beige and tan office the moment Din stepped in and tossed his hat on the chair. A smile like that didn't belong on a man like Luke Skywalker, but somehow it really really did.

“Morning, Sheriff!” Luke chirped.

Din glared from behind his sunglasses. “It’s eight AM, Skywalker.”

“That is why I said morning, not evening. It’s always eight AM when you come to work.” Luke rolled his eyes, still grinning. Until he caught sight of the jerky pack in Din’s hand. “That is not your breakfast.”

“I had a banana.”

“That I left there like 3 days ago. I know you can cook, Djarin.” Those blue eyes had the gall to narrow in *judgement* at *him* when Luke was wearing tattered hemp moccasins. Din moved around him, removing his shades to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“It’s eight AM and I don’t have coffee,” he almost groaned.

“I got it, boss,” Dune said, setting it down in front of him. She handed another one to Luke. “What’s this about cooking? Why haven't you cooked for me?”

Din was eyeing his coffee dubiously, need warring with apprehension, when Luke flopped into a chair with a laugh.

“Don't worry, I made it. You can drink it without choking.”

“I do *not* make coffee that bad. You're both just weak.”

Din sighed in relief and took the first blessed sip. When his eyes opened, he noticed the overly-washed canvas bag on his desk and his jerky suspiciously gone. When had that deviant stole it? He glared at Luke, who winked and tossed the jerky to Dune.

“Oh goodie. Djarin gets a real breakfast from Kuiil's and I get junk.”

“That's not Kuiil's, that's all Skywalker. And yours is on top, Cara.”

Dune's dark eyes gleamed greedily. Out of the reusable bag she lifted a covered glass dish. When she lifted the lid, the smell of maple syrup and bacon filled the room. She moaned in appreciation and all but ran from the room.

“Bless you, Skywalker!” she called over her shoulder.

“Stop feeding my deputies. They'll follow you home.”

Luke just grinned and lifted the next dish out. “I guess I'll feed 'em again, unlike some people, I *like* friends. But I'm only good at breakfast food, so I hope they like eggs and carbs.”

“Who doesn't.” Din uncovered his own short stack of pancakes. After a quiet moment, he looked up at Luke's innocent expression. “What is it.”

“What is what?”

Din leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. He hadn't had a single bite and it was obviously irritating the shit out of Skywalker. He raised an eyebrow as the man fidgeted. Finally, Luke let out a gusty sigh.

“Fine!” He threw up his hands, and Din noticed it was the hook today. Sometimes Skywalker got a kick out of going handleless so he could snicker behind the backs of the people who nervously looked anywhere *but* his wrist stump, other times rolling his eyes at Din whenever someone stuttered something about ‘thank you for your

service'. The hook probably helped with the bag, though. "There were power outages all over the county. Or at least, that's what the news was saying, but from what *Han* was telling me—"

Din snorted derisively. He began to eat, raising an eyebrow when Luke huffed.

"Hey, he's a voter, too, *Sheriff*. When is election season again?"

The eyebrow was joined with the other one and Din took another bite. Luke's mouth twitched upwards, before he flapped his left hand and continued.

"*Anyway*, power outages were actually more *just* in Hawkins. *East* Hawkins."

Din pinched the bridge of his nose and regretted taking the bribe in form of breakfast foods.

"Skywalker, not this again."

"That *lab* shouldn't be here! They're *nefarious*, the entire *military* is nefarious, Din! You need to be pressuring the Mayor to kick them out before it goes from power outages to, I dunno, child experiments and nuclear explosions!" Luke snapped.

Din's eyes were already rolling upwards at the word 'nefarious' being used. "You realize *you* have more sway with the Mayor than I do," Din repeated for the thousandth time. Luke shuffled in his seat and scowled out the window behind Din's head. "And there are no nuclear... anythings in that lab. No government regulators would allow something like that so close to so many civilians."

"Right, like the government has ever cared about towns like Hawkins. We barely have enough people to fill the shopping mart."

"Luke, it's a *science* and *medical* lab. There are only a bunch of white-suited nerds going in and out of there," Din said wearily. He side-eyed the pancakes, then shrugged and kept eating. The horse had left the barn already.

"I feel like I should be offended for nerds everywhere."

“Like you were a nerd.”

“I could’ve been!”

“I’m also from Hawkins. I remember the town’s *golden boy*. Something about leading our baseball team to victory for the first time in a decade? Getting a football scholarship to Notre Dame—”

“Okay, okay, I was a jock. Please stop throwing my dark past in my face. Don’t you have any heart, Sheriff?” Luke interrupted quickly with a red face.

Din exhaled through his nose heavily, not quite a laugh though his lips ticked upwards. Skywalker always had a way of tricking Din’s sense of humor. Even when, in his next breath, the younger man began a spiel about all the terrible no-good things the military lab could be doing with all that electricity they’d obviously stolen. Din wasn’t really sure how something like that was possible—did electricity even work that way? He’d always been better at math than anything really science-y in school. When he scraped his plate clean, and Luke was in the middle of a gruesome description of what happened to the human body after being pumped full of electricity—*thanks for that*—Din noticed that there was only one plate on the desk. There was a mug of coffee in front of Luke, but nothing else.

“How much sleep did you get?” Din asked abruptly. Luke stopped mid-word and grimaced.

“Enough.”

“My enough and your enough are very different.”

“Now, *that’s* a lie. You never sleep much, especially this time of the year,” Luke pointed out mildly.

Din scowled and shoved the dishes into Luke’s canvas bag. “Skywalker.”

Luke picked up his mug and tapped the side of it with the point of his hook. Watching as he played with the mechanism, the hook opening and closing restlessly, Din was pretty sure of the answer coming.

“Maybe three hours. Or... one.”

Din sighed roughly. “And you’re not eating.”

“I ate! At home!”

“Eggos?”

“Eggos are delicious.”

Din leaned on his elbow and buried his face in his hand. “Go home, Skywalker. Eat, sleep, leave me alone.”

“What, and have you be a miserable grump tonight when I come over with pizza? You know my sunny disposition is the only thing that gets you through the day,” Luke joked.

“And you’re a pain in my ass when you’re running on fumes and caffeine. I will kick you out of my house, and I really don’t want to.”

“Ha!”

“Because I want the pizza.”

“Hey!”

There was a brisk knock and both men looked over, almost eerily in sync, to see Dune leaning through the door with a serious frown on her face. “Djarin, we have an actual police problem out there. And it ain’t old Maz’s cats again.”

“Emergency?”

“Enough of one. You know how useless the fire department is. A bunch of people are having issues with their power and there’s been an accident in eastside. Apparently the only light over there is on the fritz, a couple’a cars kissed on the corner of Lilac and West.”

“Are you...? Fuck, all right. I’m coming.”

“I *told* you that light was a dumb idea. Why did you let the Mayor get away with that stupid town improvement crap?”

“He’s your dad.”

Luke scowled and held up the hat Din had tossed aside when he came in. “It’ll be a cold day in hell that my dad actually listens to anything I say.”

“Well then. There’s your answer.” Din shoved his sunglasses back on and swallowed the last of his coffee. Luke took the mug, still frowning and actually concerned. The moment he opened his mouth, Din raised a hand to cut him off. “You’re not actually a deputy. Go home, get some sleep. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Fine. Don’t go kissing cars on Lilac.”

“Shut up, Skywalker.”

The last glimpse Din got of Luke, he was grinning like the little shit he was. How a man in his mid-thirties managed to look like that freshman all-star Din could still vaguely remember was something of a miracle. More so because of what little of the everything he knew Luke had been through. Not that he would ever say anything like that *out loud*.

He was a lot less bleary and exhausted by the time he made it to the corner of Lilac and West. Dealing with the idiots who were both shouting and blaming the other felt more like watching a badly made sitcom than a useless exercise in patience he figured it should have been. It was obviously on account of the not-terrible coffee. After the car accident, there were a few other disturbances around the area. Mainly angry residents who wanted to know what had happened—Din couldn’t answer, so he just let them rant at him—and others who still didn’t have power back—a quick check showed they just needed to flip a switch in their power breakers.

As he and Dune got to the last call, an actual serious issue of someone setting their kitchen on fire when they dropped a candle, Din couldn’t help but notice they were barely two miles out from the Hawkins Lab. He scowled, sipping at coffee from the thermos Dune had made up for both of them. Luke was obviously getting into his head, but he couldn’t help but notice that, although the calls had come from several neighborhoods, they had *all* been within a two mile radius of

the lab.

“What is it?” Dune asked from beside him. He startled a bit, glancing over at her in question. “You got that big city detective face going on.”

“I haven’t been a detective in a while.”

“Three years isn’t ‘a while’. I’ve had relationships last almost as long. Well, one relationship, but you get my point,” Dune said.

“Sure.” Din sipped at his coffee again. Dune huffed, a begrudging smirk on her face at his customary lack of follow-up. To put her out of her misery, he jerked his head down the inter-city highway. “The lab. Did you notice where all these calls are from?”

Dune’s smirk slipped as she thought it through. She rolled her eyes. “You can’t be serious. Luke’s been bitchin’ about that lab for *years* and you’ve never listened.”

“I *listen*. He just didn’t have any evidence. Or a point. *This...* this is looking a little too much like evidence. I don’t like it.”

“Do you honestly think they’re up to something *nefarious*, Sheriff?”

Din snorted quickly. “No, I just don’t like it when he’s right. He makes me pay for the pizza.”

Dune laughed out loud, slapping his back and curling around her stomach. Din allowed himself a small smile, a little tip upwards on the side of his mouth. The radio *bzzted* to life behind them and Dune leaned back into the 4x4, balancing on her toes to reach the radio. Din kept staring down the highway towards the lab as he poured the last dregs of their coffee onto the gravel road. He jerked around, staring through his dark shades at Dune’s pale and equally wide-eyed stare, as Mythrol the dispatch coordinator’s message ended.

“I’m sorry, did you say a *possible 187*, over?” Dune asked. As Din ducked in, Dune squirmed out of the way.

“Yes, a possible 187 on—”



“Was that Kuil’s address?” Din demanded, cutting Mythrol’s reply off by rapidly tapping his speak button until Mythrol figured it out and shut up. Dune was already yanking open the passenger door, expression set and hard.

“Yes, Sheriff. It was called in by—”

Din slammed the radio down and threw himself into the driver’s seat. They were skidding over gravel and speeding to the far edge of town in seconds. The lights were flashing, though the siren was off. It should’ve taken more than twenty minutes to get that far down the highway. Within fifteen, the Chevy Blazer was screeching to a stop. Kuil’s Diner had been the grungy little truckstop diner just outside Hawkins for almost fifty years. The owner was a short, gruff, stubborn old man. Throughout his life, and especially in those rough high school years, Din would bike his way down the highway and spend hours there. It had been a refuge for the foster kid with a bad attitude and no town spirit. He still came pretty often, even dragging Luke with him a few times in the past three years. It was for washed up old men and women, and truckers who wanted a coffee or to rent a shower in the back before heading back onto the interstate a few miles past Kuil’s. Kuil wasn’t like a father figure. He was just... Kuil. Just *there*. No questions, no expectations. A burger and fries in a basket and an ear to listen while Din had grumbled about school, and, much later, town citizens that kept wanting him to arrest neighbors for stealing lawn gnomes.

There was an ambulance already there, and someone’s blue sedan. It made him pull up short, heart hammering against his breastbone. That blue sedan was familiar, and this was the *worst* week to be reminded of it. Then, he saw her standing next to the back of the ambulance, arms wrapped around her waist, naturally tan face looking unnaturally pale, as a paramedic spoke to her.

He strode over to her—anger, confusion, and something like *fear*—all battling in his chest. On his heels, he could hear Dune’s quietly muttered cursing.

“Omera, what are you doing here?” Din all but snapped. Omera startled and looked over at him, mouth parting. That’s when he noticed the tear tracks on her face and the too-wide blackness of her

pupils.

“Oh God, Din, I’m so sorry. I... I just found him—” She cut off and looked away, a shaking hand over her mouth.

Din stared uselessly. His eyes darted towards the paramedic.

“She’s struggling with shock, Sheriff. We recommended a sedative, but she refused. She said—”

“I’m *right here*,” Omera interrupted.

Hearing that annoyance made it easier for Din to pull himself back together. At a gesture, the paramedic nodded and stepped away, Dune following him with her notebook ready. Trusting Dune to ask the right questions, Din walked up and, hesitantly, set a hand on Omera’s shoulder. She flinched, but didn’t shake him off.

“Omera, what the hell are you doing in *Hawkins* and calling in a dead body?” Din asked, words blunt but tone soft. Omera stepped closer and grabbed his wrist. Her dark eyes met his looking haunted.

“It’s Kuiu, Din. I know I never met him, never saw him, but you described him enough. It’s Kuiu in there. God, I’m so sorry.”

Din pulled his hand away, letting it fall and clench into a fist. “What happened?” he asked dully.

Omera dragged in a slow, shaking breath. “Kuiu called me. It was maybe seven thirty this morning? He called the office and said he needed to speak to me, only me. He said there was... there was a child here. Some tiny kid who couldn’t speak and looked terrified. *Lost*. He didn’t trust, what’d he say? Government goons. But he knew about me through you and he’d trust me,” Omera recited, voice still shaking, but smiling slightly at the ‘government goon’ memory. That definitely sounded like Kuiu.

“A kid?” Din repeated. He should probably be writing this down.

“Whoever he was, he’s gone. They... whoever did this, they got here *fast*. He called Indianapolis social services at seven thirty and I came straight here. It took less than three hours? Maybe? God, I don’t even

know what time it is.” Omera laughed, brittle and shrill, and buried her hands in her hair.

“You... Damn it, I need to take you to the county office, take your statement... Winta, she’s in school, right?” Din asked.

Omera glanced up through the mess of hair that had fallen out her professional bun. It was so familiar it *burned*. “Yeah... yeah, Winta’s fine. I should have time... I’m not a suspect, am I?” she asked, frowning.

“For now, no. There’s no reason...” Din broke off as another car came squealing down Kuil’s drive. Rocks and dust resettled under the tires and two more deputies hurried out of the car. The tech van pulled up right behind them. “I gotta handle this and I can’t... I can’t take your statement. You get that, right?”

“Yes, don’t want to seemed biased when you ask if your ex-wife murdered a friend of yours,” Omera said dryly. Then, she abruptly covered her mouth again, almost retching. “Oh God, it was- it could be a *murder*. I just...”

Din sighed and dragged her close. She clutched at his back, fingers curling into his coat, and broke into a peal of sobs. She couldn’t stop whispering *Oh God* under her breath, over and over, as Din’s shirt got steadily damper under her face. He sighed again and patted her hair.

He’d fucked up four years ago, but Omera had, for some dumb reason, never hated him. Never blamed him. Only smiled and let him go. The least he could do was spend a minute pretending like he wasn’t completely out of his depth and hug her while she cried. He looked around to find Dune, saw her directing the new deputies to put up crime scene tape before following the techs, and their equipment, inside. As if she could feel his attention shift—maybe she could, after five years of his attention always pulling away, maybe she could sense it happening—Omera pulled away and wiped at her eyes. Her mascara was smeared and her lipstick was long gone. He wished he had *something*—a handkerchief, a fucking spare tissue, *something*—but he only stood there, hands hanging at his side uselessly, as Omera collected herself, by herself. His fingers clenched and relaxed.

"I'm fine. You... you go do your job. Find whoever did... did *that*," Omera told him, suddenly fierce and furious, but still too pale. She bit her lip. "And the child, Din. Kuiil wouldn't have called me like that for a lie. There *was* a child. You have to find him."

"Him?" Din asked. He actually reached for his notepad, fingers barely shaking.

"Yes. Kuiil said it was a little boy, hair buzzed short, missing one of his front teeth. He said he wasn't good with kids, never had one himself, but he didn't even look ten years old, and was, I quote, scrawny as a half-starved cat," Omera listed off. "He thinks the child wasn't white, maybe mixed or African-American, Kuiil wasn't sure. But he couldn't speak. He kept using his hands and grabbing things, ate so fast he barely breathed between bites."

"What about his clothes? Did Kuiil say?" Din asked, pencil scratching swiftly.

"A hospital gown." Din's eyebrows jumped up and he stared at her. She shrugged wearily. "That's what he said. He might've given him actual clothes before... before..." Omera glanced towards the diner.

"Okay... okay," Din muttered under his breath. He tucked the notepad and pencil stub away, then reached out and laid a careful hand on her shoulder. "I gotta get in there. Over there? That's Deputy Erso." He waved the young woman over when he caught her eye. "She'll take you in, get your statement. Ask for coffee, even if you don't want to, you need something hot." Omera nodded, chin trembling. "I still have your home number, so don't leave Indianapolis. Make sure we can contact you if we need to."

"I... I understand," Omera said slowly. She inhaled sharply, but breathed out slower, steadier. "Din..."

"I get it. Go with Erso. Get home to Winta."

"I got her, boss," Erso said. She put an arm around Omera's shoulders, a little awkwardly, but her voice was kind and soft. Din turned towards the diner, fervently wishing he didn't have to go in. "Lucky for you, the station's nutty mascot came by this morning."

There should be some good coffee left.”

“Um... thank you? That’s not... a very kind thing to say...” Omera said hesitantly. “Din!” He paused before slowly looking over his shoulder. Omera smiled, tiny and unsure. “She got your gift. Came just in time for her party and she loved it. She misses you.”

He closed his eyes, grateful for the sunglasses hiding most of his face. With a quick nod, he turned back to the diner and didn’t look back again. Inside, the techs and his deputies had already set out several evidence markers. Actually, not even several. There were maybe three or five. He scowled as he walked around the diner, but no more markers were in sight. The back door was strangely broken based on the damage to the doorjamb, and Din paused to squint at it a little closer. Deputy Rook was already outside, following a tech who was carefully taking pictures. Finally, he headed to the table where a small group was carefully taking more pictures and bagging what little evidence there was.

A basket of half-eaten fries. A tipped plastic cup of pop. A broken white mug that used to be full of coffee that was now a puddle under Kuiil’s unmoving feet.

Din removed his glasses and crouched next to Dune. Her mouth was pulled into a thin line, eyes dark and sad. Like Din, she often came here to talk shit with Kuiil and drink coffee even more sludge-like and disgusting than her own. Both of them stared, grim and silent, at Kuiil’s slack and bloodied face.

“.22. Looks like point blank, maybe a silencer,” Dune muttered, fury making her voice shake. Din nodded; he’d seen the marks on Kuiil’s temple, too. She got to her feet abruptly, all but snarling. “Who the hell breaks into a truckstop diner and kills the owner with a *silencer*? Kuiil’s been in Hawkins his whole life. There’s no way he was secretly a fucking gangster or ex-mafia don.”

“The till?”

“Emptied. Pretty sure they wanted it to look like a robbery, but it’s too clean, Djarin,” Dune said, rubbing a hand over her hair. “And it could just be the shape of the pistol’s barrel, but it *looks* like a

silencer. Robbers in nowhere Indiana don't have *silencers*."

"And they didn't break in." Dune looked over at him. He jerked his chin towards the backdoor. "The damage shows it's outward, someone, someones maybe, broke *out* the backdoor. Which means they didn't have time to unlock it, but the front door doesn't show any signs of damage."

"Wow. None of that makes any sense."

"Nope." Din frowned and stepped back when the paramedics came in with a gurney. He nodded to let them carry Kuiil away, and he and Dune watched in silence as they rolled out. "He opens up at four for the first truckers to roll in. He called Omera at seven thirty, and she got here before ten thirty. Why was the back door broken open? And where's the kid? "

"The kid? Is that why Omera was here? Kuiil called her to come pick up a *kid*?" Dune asked incredulously.

"Kuiil knows Omera works in social services, I've told him. He would've called her himself instead of the Sheriff's office to... help me out, I think," Din said, tone softer, almost guilty. Dune clapped a hand to his shoulder to squeeze it gently.

"Yeah, I think he would've, too. But, Djarin, there isn't a single sign of a kid. Well, unless the fries and pop weren't Kuiil's. I thought it was weird, with the coffee *and* the pop on the table. And Kuiil doesn't normally eat out here."

"He didn't." Din agreed, rough and low. Dune winced at the past tense. "I'm going to look outside. Put in an APB and amber alert for a kid, less than ten, wearing hospital scrubs, shaved head and missing front tooth." He didn't stick around to hear or see Dune's affirmative. There was a kid out there, some kid that Kuiil wanted to help, and maybe, just maybe, it got him dead. Even if that didn't make a lick of damn sense.

Every deputy not already busy was called down to the area to start a search.

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Rey was fidgeting. The teachers were used to her fidgeting, really. She'd never gotten the hang of sitting still, not when she could be moving instead. And everything in her *screamed* to be moving. It was already five minutes to the lunch break and Rey hadn't seen Rose *anywhere*. They didn't share many classes; Rose was actually the brainy one. Rose always tried to brush it off, saying California had an advanced curriculum compared to some nowhere town middle America, but Rey had seen Rose's homework. Had even gotten help from Rose for her own. Rose might not be a genius, but she worked hard and understood things quickly. Most of her classes were junior year rather than sophomore year classes. But Rey still *saw* Rose during the day. Breaks at their lockers. Passing in the halls. Meeting in the math hallway bathroom to whine about algebra II and calculus. But no Rose showed up.

The moment the bell rang, Rey was out of her seat, bag bouncing against her spine. She hadn't even bothered to take the books out. The teacher probably hadn't noticed. Her beat up sneakers squeaked over linoleum as she darted through the halls. Finn and Poe were at Finn's locker, both laughing about something, the *morons*. They turned with surprised eyes just in time for Rey to sock them each in the shoulder, *hard*, making them wince.

"What was that for?" Finn asked, bewildered.

"She *isn't here!*" Rey snapped. They stared at her. Then, Finn's eyes widened.

"Rose? Rose isn't here?"

"No! I've been trying to track her down during every break and I haven't seen her!"

"Maybe she's just been too tired and went straight to classes? We got in really late. I'm probably gonna bail on practice today. I'll just trip over a ball and land on my face if I tried," Poe said, although he was

frowning as he spoke.

“She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t just *avoid* me, and she’d have to if I didn’t see her,” Rey disagreed. Finn wrapped an arm around her shoulder, tucking her closer to his chest where she leaned with a sigh.

“We’ll check the cafeteria, okay? Just real fast, and if we still don’t see her, we’ll go ask her teachers. They’ll know,” he suggested.

It was probably useless, Rey *knew* Rose wouldn’t be there, but she nodded and couldn’t help but hope. God, she hoped she was wrong. She didn’t know why, but the longer she didn’t see Rose, the worse that heavy horrible feeling settled in her gut. Something was *wrong wrong wrong*. She *knew* it. But she let Finn drag her towards the cafeteria, still tucked close to his chest, Poe on her other side and slipping her bag off her shoulder from under Finn’s arm.

She wasn’t there. And Rey’s heart pumped in overdrive as her eyes darted from face to face, table to table. No Rose. *No Rose.*

“Whoa, Rey, take it easy, *breathe*. Hyperventilating isn’t gonna help Rose,” Poe said quickly, rubbing her back. She nodded, eyes stinging and chest tight.

“Ugh, you’re not gonna like it, but I see someone we can ask,” Finn said, actual distaste curling his lip. Rey blinked and followed his gaze. Her lip automatically curled, matching Finn’s expression exactly.

“You’re *kidding*, right?” Rey demanded, voice still a little too breathless.

“Unfortunately, no. They both have Mrs. Unduli for third period, right? Rose says they’re even friends,” Finn said. He rolled his shoulders back and adopted a pleasant, business-like smile. “You stay here and I’ll be right back.”

“The last time you tried to talk to Solo, you both got a week’s detention, Finn,” Poe interrupted, grabbing Finn’s elbow and yanking him back. “I’ll go.” Finn rolled his eyes, but stayed put and let Poe



walk towards the table where Ben Solo sat with his small handful of angry friends.

They weren't even bad kids. There were rumors about some of them smoking behind the gym or chucking rocks at cars in the junkyard at the edge of town, but nothing really bad. Just... *assholes*. Rey and Finn hadn't really had a problem with them, probably still wouldn't have, if Ben hadn't been total *tool* to the both of them almost their entire lives. He'd mellowed out in the last year or two, somehow Rose had become his *friend*, incredibly, but Finn and Rey wanted nothing to do with him.

Rey watched, hands clenched into fists at her sides, barely feeling Finn's hand rubbing her shoulder encouragingly, as Poe put on his 'I'm the Nice Guy Here, You Can Trust Me' smile and leaned against the table near Solo. The worst of the lot glared at him for daring to breathe their air, but Ben just looked up, listened, then got to his feet. Poe frowned, but followed as Ben walked up to where Rey and Finn were standing. Both friends stood up straight, spines like steel rods and barely controlled scowls on their faces.

"Rose wasn't in class," Ben mumbled, eyes on the ground, then darting upwards to glare somewhere around Rey's right ear, not quite meeting her eyes. "She's in my first and third, and she wasn't there for either. I thought you all played hooky today. Didn't you have that stupid concert last night?"

"And we all came home together and were supposed to come to school together!" Rey snapped, stepping almost onto his toes. Her finger all but punched him in the middle of the chest and he grunted softly. "Why the hell did she tell *you* about the concert?"

"I know you can't believe it, but we're actually *friends*. I know she told you that a thousand times," Ben retorted, towering over Rey. God, she *hated* how much taller everyone was to her. She had the intense and burning need to cut his knees out from under him.

"Okay, okay, Rose isn't in school, so now that *that's* been confirmed, we need a plan," Poe said, jumping in quickly and placing a palm on Ben's chest and Rey's shoulder to gently shove them apart. Rey huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, and Ben slapped Poe's

hand away.

“Why didn’t she come to school with you, if you *planned* it?” Ben asked, still frowning and staring at Rey.

“It’s my fault,” Finn said. His mouth was twisted to the side and his shoulders were tense. “I told Rey she must’ve gotten a ride with Paige.”

Ben was already shaking his head. “I sit out on the quad until the bell rings. I would’ve seen Paige drop her off.”

“Creepy,” Rey hissed under her breath.

“*Observant*,” Ben hissed back.

“Then, we’ll go straight to her house after school, okay?” Poe suggested. He grabbed Finn’s shoulder and shook him a bit, making him almost smile. “It’s not your fault. I thought you were right, too.”

“It’s *my* fault. I *knew* something was wrong. Finn, I *told* you I heard —” She broke off, glancing at Ben and then staring at the hole at the toe of her shoe.

“Heard what?”

“None of your business.”

Rey turned on her heel and stalked away.

“Rey! Wait! What about lunch?” Finn ran after her, his hand around Poe’s arm to drag him along. Poe just sighed and let himself be led. Ben glared darkly after them, fisted hands deep in his jeans pockets, shoulders high around his ears.

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The sun was actually setting by the time they made it back to the sheriff’s office. Everyone trudged to their desks or lockers, covered in

leaves and dirt and nothing to show for it. At least Omera's car was gone, thankfully, and Din retreated to his office to read the report surely waiting for him from the techs and medical examiner. He pulled up short in the doorway when he saw the tall, lanky brunette slouched in a chair, boots up on the desk.

"You wanna lose your feet, Solo?"

Han jerked to attention, boots hitting the ground, and he grinned winsomely at Din. "Sheriff! You really know how to keep 'em waiting!"

"Solo, today is *not* the day to—"

"Look, *you* know that *I* know what happened. You also know I could've walked over there and read that file and you never would've known," Han said, waving a magnanimous hand towards the manila folder on Din's desk. Din scowled at Han's still winsomely smirking face. That Din, not for the first time, wanted to punch. "But I didn't, because I'm an honorable man." He even pressed a hand to his heart as he spoke.

Din snorted.

"So just answer a few questions, for the press, for the *people* of this great town, and I'll be outta your hair."

"Ongoing investigation," Din grunted.

"So you're gonna play hardball. I'm hurt. I thought we were buddies, Din. You've been to my house, you babysat the rugrats—"

"I am *not* a babysitter. I was visiting Luke."

"Luke doesn't live with us and you know it. You were tagteaming watching the terrible twosome because you'd never leave Luke to do that alone. Why do you think we actually ask Luke to babysit?"

Din frowned. "I'm going to tell him that."

Han grinned wider. "Whatever you say, buddy." The grin fell and there was something actually serious and genuine in his eyes as he

leaned forward. "Din, I know old Kuiil was a friend of yours. Me n' Chewie liked the old bastard, too. He was great at poker, wiped my wallet so clean Leia still gives me grief about it."

Din sunk into his chair, dropping his hat and shades to the desktop, and sighed heavily.

"Just give me something here. People are really freakin'. There hasn't been a murder in Hawkins since... shit, *ever*."

"1961."

"That's over twenty years ago! I was still in Asia, hunting down commies for interviews in the jungles, jeez," Han leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. "Can you at least say if it's homicide or suicide?"

"It's a suspicious death," Din replied wearily. "It wasn't suicide."

"Okay, okay, that's something." Han dug out his beat-up old notepad and made a few notes. "Any signs of break in? Robbery?"

"On. Going. Investigation." Din bit out.

"Why was an Indianapolis social services agent at the scene?"

Din startled in place and stared at him. Han shrugged. "I don't even..." Din sighed and rubbed his face. "I'm sure you've heard the APB, then."

"Yeah. That kid's connected?"

"There's been no sign of him, but it was confirmed that Kuiil called social services and was dead before she arrived. We don't know how the child is involved, but we know he was there. He could be an eyewitness."

Han whistled between his teeth. "Shit, a kid that young seeing something like that? The APB report said younger than ten."

"Unconfirmed. But yeah, he's young."

“Jaina and Jacen... god, they’re six, he could be their age. And he’s out there in the woods, on the run, after seeing a *murder*?” Han said, eyes wide.

Han was so good at pretending like life didn’t touch him, that everything was a hand of cards and he was there to play, but every now and then, Din glimpsed this man. The man that Luke adored as a brother, that a woman like *Leia Organa* had married within a year of meeting, that had three kids he basically raised while his wife dove headfirst into politics. Din wanted to punch Han Solo at least 95% of the time. The other five percent Din had a grudging respect for that kept him from actually punching.

“Keep to facts, or I’ll sic your wife on you,” Din said, opening the manila folder and glaring at the single piece of paper inside. There was a *murder* in his town and he had less than five pieces of insubstantial evidence and a single testimony from his *ex-wife* of all people.

Fuck his life, seriously.

“Does Luke know?” Din looked up at Han’s question, his eyebrows already rising. “That Omera was in town.”

Oh. Din frowned, eyebrows now low and almost touching the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know. Why does that matter?”

“I dunno, because your *ex-wife* was in town and maybe Luke should know.”

“Again. Why does that matter.”

“God, you’re both obtuse.”

His eyebrows fell even lower into a baffled glower. Han pushed himself out of his chair and checked his watch. He muttered a curse under his breath.

“I have to start dinner or the twins’ll skin me. All right, I’ll make sure to keep to the facts, but there’s gonna be an article first thing in the morning. Any updates, you got my number.” Han jabbed a finger in Din’s still glowering direction. “Call Luke.”

“Get out.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” Han raised his hands and started out the door. He stopped and looked back. “Good luck. Whoever did that to Kuuil... get him.”

His frown softened slightly, and Din nodded once.

After a few hours had gone by, and Han was long gone, Din wondered how much more he *could* do. There hadn’t been any fingerprints at the scene, in fact, not even *Kuuil’s* prints had been anywhere, and the techs had gone over it all three times. The money from the register hadn’t turned up anywhere, and neither had any sort of gun. They knew the body had been moved, that the blood patterns hadn’t matched up to where he supposedly died, but there were no other blood sprays or patterns to show where he might’ve been shot. Probably in the diner, but there was no actual evidence of it.

As for the kid, there was nothing to prove he’d ever been there other than Omera’s testimony. And, as Dune pointed out, Kuuil wasn’t one to drink soda pop of any kind, especially not while also drinking coffee. At the back and outside near the backdoor, there had been some signs of someone, but there was no telling if it were a kid or the burglar-murderer.

Din tapped at the photos of the back of the diner. There hadn’t been any other signs of more gunshots, which was strange. If the kid had run, why hadn’t they tried to shoot the witness? How did the door get busted open and why? His fingers tapped restlessly. This was honestly the only lead they had, but their afternoon of searching had uncovered nothing. Perhaps the scared-stiff kid had heard all their noise and hid? That was feasible. It wasn’t that far from Din’s house, he could...

He grabbed his shades and hat and swiftly got to his feet.

“Sheriff Djarin, there’s... are you going somewhere?” Iggy asked as he leaned awkwardly through Din’s door. Everything Iggy did was a bit stilted and awkward. He was tall and bony and overly literal and a great assistant, and *awkward*.

"I was planning on it. Whatever it is, it'll have to wait—"

"No, it *can't*," interrupted a fierce young woman's voice. Paige Tico, one of the newest citizens of Hawkins with a sister barely a few years younger, pushed past Iggy. Behind her, three teenagers looking shifty-eyed and wan, followed closely. "My sister is missing. She's *been* missing since around 3:42 this morning."

Din stared, glancing towards Iggy, at each teenager's face, and finally to the gleaming tears that Ms. Tico was stubbornly refusing to let fall.

"Aw, hell," Din whispered. He fell against the side of the desk and scrubbed a hand over his face. Then, he straightened his shoulders and gestured towards the chairs (only two for the four people standing there). "Let me get a notepad. Iggy, water."

"Immediately, Sheriff."

Din stared at the notepad, his forehead on his hand, and his pencil tapping the desktop rapidly. The teens had all but spoken over and stuttered around themselves like tongue-tied toddlers, but he was pretty sure he'd gotten their story straight. Unfortunately, the steady and resolute young woman, Paige, had either been working late at the Walmart distribution center a good thirty minutes out of town, or sleeping on her couch where she had barely managed to stumble getting home from a double-shift, so she had no way of confirming any of it. He looked at the teens, each eagerly waiting and reeking of guilt and fear.

"This is everything?" he asked, glancing over the three and then to the sister.

"Yes." Paige's hands were clasped between her knees, one leg bouncing.

"You said you keep a gun in your house and the ammo box was missing six?" Din repeated, voice carefully bland.

“We moved here from *Oakland* and our parents, um, they owned a convenience store. They...” Paige broke off and breathed heavily through her nose. “Our dad bought that gun for our mom, and we all learned how to shoot. I keep track of how many bullets because my dad taught me to be extra careful when it comes to gun safety.” Paige got her feet and slammed her hands on the desk. Din’s eyes widened as the girl barely 20 years old and half his size snarled at him. “I *know* the last time that gun was taken out and how much was left in that box. Someone was in that house and Rose went for that gun.”

Din scrubbed his hand over his face. A bewildering homicide, a missing child, and now a missing and armed teenager? How... *why*? He stood up and walked over to his door. Paige gasped furiously and the teenage girl leapt to her feet like a shocked cat.

“Dune! I have another APB.”

Dune walked into view and took the notepad he held out. She glanced it over with pursed lips and her eyebrows arched upwards. “Starcruise Park? The trailer park? We had a call there this morning. The candle.”

“Within the radius.”

“Fuck,” Dune murmured with feeling. She met Din’s eye. “He’ll never let you live this down, Djarin.”

“She’s sixteen, no jokes.”

Dune looked over his shoulder to see Paige and the teenagers, and grimaced. “Right, sorry. Don’t mind me, Paige, I’m an asshole.” Paige’s mouth trembled into a smile, but her eyes were wide and baffled darting between them. “I’ll be right on this. I’ll send out Erso and...?”

“Andor just got his gold last month and they work well together. See if there’s a tech that can get off the diner case for as long as they need.”

“I’ll *make* one get out there and back asap,” Dune promised darkly.

He opened his mouth, then shut it with a heavy sigh through his nose



when Dune left too fast for him to warn her not to threaten bodily harm. Too late. He turned back to Paige.

“Ms. Tico, your house is a crime scene,” Paige inhaled sharply, and it almost sounded like a sob. The girl teenager grabbed at Paige’s hands and they held on to each other with white knuckles. Probably should’ve said that nicer... “I know this is a difficult situation, and I don’t know if this helps, but if there wasn’t any sign of blood or anyone left at the scene, there’s a good chance she’s alive.”

Paige and the girl were staring at him, jaws clenched so tight the muscles ticked under the skin and tears streamed down their faces silently. “You’re not lying?” Paige asked at last.

“The chances aren’t good, I can’t lie about that,” Din admitted with a small shake of his head. “But they’re better than they could be. Do you have somewhere you can stay?”

“I would say stay with me, but the old guy is a dick,” the teenager said through a thick, damp voice. Paige chuckled without humor.

“Thanks, Rey. Um, yeah, I’ll stay at the Motel 6. Will it be long?”

“Depends on what we find. You can file your expense with Iggy at the front desk. He’ll get you reimbursed,” Din told her. Paige nodded, breath shaking past her bitten raw lips.

“Okay. Please, just... find Rose?”

Din stepped up and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll do everything I can.”

He watched them troop out, the two teenaged boys huddled close around the girl. The one boy who looked like that Dameron kid rushed to open the door. Dune slapped Din’s notepad to his chest. Din grabbed it with a grunt.

“This is getting nuts. Crazier than Luke’s theory about LSD in the water.”

“I’m actually starting to wish the LSD thing was real,” Din muttered. He sighed and side-eyed her.

“Don’t even—”

“Want some overtime?”

“*Damn it, Djarin.*”

“I need someone at Kuil’s overnight. Rook always wants extra shifts, take him with you,” Din suggested.

She crossed her arms over her chest and shrugged. “It’s true and he isn’t entirely annoying. But maybe I had a date tonight.”

“Did you?”

“Hell no. Even if I did, I’d cancel. I’d be the worst date with all this shit going on.”

“I’d do it myself and you know it, but the county won’t let me pay myself overtime,” Din said with a grimace.

“Only because you overtimed yourself so much the *Mayor* noticed.”

“I still think Luke was behind it,” Din said with narrowed eyes.

Dune chuckled and clapped his shoulder. “Speaking of, it’s almost eight.”

“So—*oh*,” Din hurried back to grab his things from the office before running towards the door, keys jangling in his coat pocket. “Get Rook to sign in for overtime, if anything happens, make sure you call me *immediately*. I don’t care what time.”

“I don’t get why you want a watch on Kuil’s.”

“That kid could come back, or we can hope the criminal is stupid. I want you two there, *all night*, Dune,” Din ordered. “And make sure Iggy gets home.”

“I will clock out at 8:30 PM precisely, Sheriff,” Iggy called from his desk.

“Well, good. All right.” He swung out the door.

He made it to the house, still too tense and fingers clenching and unclenching around his keys. It didn't feel right to be here. Kuiil was in the fucking *morgue*, there was a teenage girl (with a *gun*) missing, and a tiny nonverbal kid running hungry and barely dressed in the woods. And he was coming home in time for pizza and beer. Maybe Luke wouldn't mind digging out some flashlights and going searching again? Who was he kidding, Luke was probably going to show up and *suggest* it.

He hipchecked the front door open. The living room light flicked on and something fell with a loud clatter in the kitchen

The gun was out of his holster and aiming forward before he consciously decided it. He caught the front door with his foot and gently let it fall back into place. It didn't quite close, but it was enough. Slowly, eyes squinting and thumb ready on the safety, he walked sideways, foot crossing carefully over the other. With a jerk, he turned around the half-wall that separated the living room from the kitchen/dining area. Nothing jumped out or shot at him, but he groaned, shoulders slumping. His fridge was hanging open and everything inside scattered all over the floor—luckily, he didn't have much in there. He grabbed the fridge door and leaned around, only to roll his eyes, pistol lowering slightly, at the mess of shelves and drawers and torn or broken open packages. Ketchup, beer puddles, left over salsas, and pickled jalapeño juice was *everywhere*. When he kicked the mess aside and slammed the door shut, he noticed there was a lot more glass on the ground.

“*Damn it,*” he whispered, seeing the glass panel in the kitchen door knocked in.

It was probably just a raccoon... a very strong and very hungry raccoon. He sighed and moved towards the hallway past the dining area, gun still held in his hands and thumb on the safety. The bathroom was empty and not a mess—that was a relief. The last room left was his bedroom. The bed was still untouched, pillow undented, but his closet door was ajar. Stiffening his jaw, eyes narrowing, Din lifted a foot and kicked it in, holding it back with his shoulder and his gun aiming at...

Big brown eyes wet with tears and tiny hands clutching a familiar

yellow box.

“*Shit*, shit, I’m sorry—” The little boy under his hanging plaid lifted his hand as Din dropped his. “FUCK!” Din flew backwards, hit the bed, and rolled over the top. He kept his finger away from the trigger, but that was the only thing he managed to control as he flung ass over kettle to the other side of his room. He thudded to the ground with a loud groan. “What the *fuck* was *that*?”

He sat up, a hand on his head, and looked through blurry eyes to see that tiny kid with the too-big eyes gazing around the corner of the bed with damp eyes. His hand began to rise and Din quickly lifted his empty hand, fingers splayed, and slowly began to lower his gun.

“Look, look, don’t... don’t do that, I thought you were a raccoon or a... well, not a kid. Look, the gun’s down,” Din said, words tripping over themselves and the gun set on the carpet.

The boy glanced down at the gun, then back at Din, then at the gun. With a furious glare, the gun rose into the air, over Din’s head, and crashed through his window to the outside. When Din looked back, eyes too wide and mouth gaping, the kid lifted a tiny fist to rub at his bloody nose. Still glaring suspiciously at Din.

“Okay. No guns. Good idea. I’m glad you didn’t take it for yourself, very responsible, kid,” Din said, voice low and soothing. The kid grumbled and hugged the box of Eggos to his skinny chest. He reached into the box, pulled out a half-eaten, still-frozen waffle, and began to gnaw on it. “Hey, kid, that’s... that’s not how you eat those.”

The kid *growled* at him.

“All right, you know what, do whatever you want. But how about I heat some of those up for you? No, no, you keep *that* one,” Din clarified when the kid flinched and growled louder. The growls became discontented grumbles. “And then I take the rest in that box and I heat them. I promise they taste better hot. Aren’t you cold, kid?”

He was shaking pretty hard, hard enough that Din wondered how his

bones weren't clattering. Din gradually began to stand, inch by painful inch, as the boy squinted and skittered backwards into the closet. Din froze, then slowly stood up straight. He kept his back to the wall, his hands up high, and the kid in sight. He crept backward down the hall and winced as his boots squished banana peels. Suddenly, there was a loud, vigorous knocking.

Din jerked, spun towards the front door, and slipped to the ground so hard the whole house shook. From the bedroom, there was a high-pitched and muffled giggle. Din rose up on his elbows, groaning, to see that kid *laughing* at him from around the doorjamb of his closet.

"Damn it," Din said on a resigned exhale, dropping his head back and staring at the ceiling.

"Din!" Luke shouted through the door, knocking again. "Are you okay?"

The kid flinched and scurried out of sight. A few plaid shirts fell to the ground. So... back in the closet... Din got to his hands and knees, then stumbled and grunted his way to the door. He jerked it open before Luke could knock again and stepped out onto the porch, quickly closing the door behind him so he couldn't see the mess in the kitchen.

"Uh, hey," Din choked.

Luke rocked back on his heels, but there wasn't far to go on the tiny porch, so they were pressed almost chest to chest. Din's eyes darted away, feeling his cheeks heat when he caught sight of Luke's equally red face. He was bracing two large, flat boxes between a hip and his wrist.

"Ah... hey?" Luke squeaked, the boxes wobbled a bit, but he pressed them closer to his hip. He shook his head and grinned, lopsided and rueful. "Evening, Din. I figured you'd be in late. So, I got pizza, but in my car I got flashlights, a few extra coats and blankets, and Chewie's best hound. Her name is Shyo and she can smell weed from five miles away. I know this because she smelled Han's van five miles down the road. Don't tell Han I told you he has weed in his van, also, don't arrest him."

“Luke, I’m not going to arrest Han,” Din said with an eyeroll. He glanced towards the battered station wagon where an all-white, droopy-eyed, and flap-eared hound was hanging her head out of the back window. “I... I don’t think tonight’s a good night.”

Luke’s eyebrows rose. “Din, I know you wanna be out looking, but so do I. I know Rose. She and Ben study at my place sometimes, she’s a good kid. And Han told me about the boy in the woods.”

Din pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’m just saying, we’re gonna eat some pizza, I’ll make some coffee, and we’ll both go feel useful while also not sleeping. Which we’re both bad at, so, win-win,” Luke continued.

“I do want to get out there, I probably would be out there already, but I can’t. I just,” Din glanced towards his bedroom window, and quickly back at Luke as soon as he remembered it was broken. When Luke turned to look, Din literally panicked. There was no other excuse. He grabbed Luke’s face in both hands and held him in place. Luke stared at him, eyebrows so high they disappeared behind his bangs, and his cheeks squished together.

“What?” Luke mumbled.

“Um, just, um, just look at me?” Din said stupidly.

“I’m... looking?” Luke was beginning to smile, a little distorted by his squished in cheeks. “So why’s it a bad night for roaming the woods for a few kids and what’s that have to do with you grabbing my face?”

“It’s... um, they’re not correlated?”

“Is that a question?” Luke began to laugh, his left hand rising and pressing Din back by the chest slightly. “I can look at you inside, Din. It’s getting cold out here.” He moved to scoot past Din towards the door.

“Y-yeah, n-no, you can’t... you can’t go inside,” Din finally blurted, grabbing Luke’s hand and stepping in front of him, blocking him.

"What? I've been coming over for three years," Luke said incredulously. "You really think I care what it looks like in there or something?"

Inside, a door slammed shut and Din closed his eyes and whispered a low, fervent *fuck*.

"I have to—I can explain—"

The pizza boxes slammed into Din's chest, pinned by the hook gleaming under the porch light as the bottom of a pie burned him through his khaki shirt. Luke was smiling, eyes glittering dangerously.

"I didn't see her car, but I guess she needed a ride."

"What?"

"Omera's here. You just had to tell me."

"*What?* Omera is not here. She's back in Indianapolis by now," Din said, baffled and utterly lost. "How do you even—fucking *Han*," he muttered.

"Okay, I believe you. She's not here. So who is?" Luke demanded, arms crossed over his chest. "Who's so important you're blowing off looking for those kids with me? That you won't even let me *inside*?"

"Ah..." Din looked anywhere but Luke, his mouth and the corner of his eyes pinching. "No one?"

Luke turned on his heel and was down the stairs before Din could regret it. Which was fast, because he regretted that obvious lie *immediately*. The pizza began to slip out of the boxes and Din scrambled to hold them horizontally again.

"Luke!"

"I'll see you in the morning. I have better things to do than watching you lie *terribly* to my face," Luke replied. He sounded breezy and casual, tossing the words over his shoulder like it didn't matter. The tone had Din wincing.

“Luke, wait.”

“Are you gonna to lie to me again?” Luke asked, the front door of his station wagon creaking open. He glanced over at Din, who stared down at the misshapen boxes in his hands. “So my choices are stay here and watch you ineptly lie to me while standing on your porch, or going out and getting shit done in the woods. Right.” The car door slammed, the headlights blinding Din a second later, and Luke peeled out of the rutted and uneven driveway.

Din leaned back against his front door and banged his head back against the door a few times with a loud sigh. Then, he remembered what had pissed Luke off. “*Fuck.*” The pizzas dropped to the ground.

Din scrambled down the porch to dig through the grass and shove his thrown gun into his belt at the small of his back. He all but flung himself around the side of the house to the kitchen door, but it wasn’t open. He jumped up the few steps and peered in to see the kid perched on the kitchen counter, balancing precariously on his knees as he tugged at the freezer door. Din kept himself from shouting and scaring the kid, instead knocking quietly and whispering,

“Hey, hey, kid.”

He turned towards the door and stared at Din owlishly. He didn’t scream, fall, or... do the hand thing, so Din tried out a very weary, half-assed smile and pulled open the door to swing inside. Glass crunched under his boots as he crept closer.

“Hey, kid. Not very patient, are ya? Still hungry?”

The kid nodded, lip trembling.

“All right, I don’t know if there are anymore Eggos, but I’ve got pizza. Let’s get down—wait, no, you’ll step on glass,” Din said quickly snatching the kid up under his armpits and dangling him over the ground before he could jump down.

The kid stared at him, curling his skinny legs up to his stomach but otherwise hanging like a ragdoll. A very freaked-out looking ragdoll.

“Ah, sorry, um,” Din stepped quickly over the mess and set him down



on the carpet. "Why don't you go sit on the couch. It's comfy, well, it's more comfortable than the floor."

The kid stared, blinked slowly, and stared some more. Din helpfully pointed to the lumpy old couch. The kid made a curious little noise and shuffled over the carpet, paused, then shuffled again with a giggle, tiny toes digging into the threadbare fabric. While the kid... experienced... carpet?, he slipped the gun out of the back of his pants and hid it in the nearest kitchen drawer. Din hurried to the front door before the kid could notice him dithering and maybe throw his service pistol at his head this time. The kid was bouncing up and down on the couch, feet kicking over the floor and hands braced on the cushions, when Din came back and opened the pizza box.

The cheese and pepperoni was smeared all over the top of the box, so it didn't look pretty, but the kid's eyes grew three times larger. He leaned forward on his hands, nose twitching, and he looked up at Din with his mouth gulping like a fish. Din's mouth quirked upwards, the smile a little less weary, a little more genuine, this time, and he carefully peeled a slice out of the box and handed it over. The kid grabbed it in both hands, tomato sauce and cheese oozing between his fingers and dripping onto his shins and the carpet. He tore into the slice, smearing it everywhere, before Din could adjust his hold.

"Well, too late. Good thing this old mobile home is older than me," Din said, chuckling a little. He grabbed his own slice and flopped to his butt on the floor facing the kid on the couch. The kid stopped, blinked, and moved the pizza around to hold it like Din did. Din grinned, actually *grinned*. "Good job, kiddo. You're pretty smart, huh?"

The kid smiled. It was kinda bloody-looking with all the tomato sauce. Cheese and grease shined over his dark skin, and one of his front incisors missing. But Din felt his own grin widening.

"My name is Din. I'm the sheriff here, so it's kinda my job to keep you safe, all right? I'm sorry I scared you." The kid burred and made grabby hands at the pizza, his own slice all but inhaled already. Din huffed and handed him another. "Greedy, huh? I dunno how you got here, or where you came from, but... I'm glad at least one of you kids is safe."

The kid stared at him owlshly. All the joy wiped off his face and he shivered all over, whimpering into his pizza slice.

“Oh, damn, you’re still in that thing. I’ll go grab you something warmer. I don’t have any kid clothes, not these days... but I guess you might not’ve like Winta’s old clothes either. I’ll be right back, don’t break anymore windows or... or go anywhere, got it?”

The kid just stared wordlessly at the pizza and whined and shivered.

In his room, Din dug through old shirts and gym shorts, trying to find something small enough and with a draw string to put on the kid. Clutching a plaid shirt he hadn’t been able to wear for almost a year, Din stopped for a moment, staring incomprehensibly at the checkered black and green and grey. Slowly, he fell to his ass and buried his face in his hands to let out a muffled groan.

How the *fuck* did this all happen? And what was he supposed to do next?!

---

Rey gnawed on her fingernails, tearing them down to the wicks, a few of them bleeding. Paige had been so understanding, moving into action the minute she realized that Rey, Finn, and Poe were telling the truth. Apparently, they hadn’t been very good sneaking; she’d overheard Rey and Rose whispering excitedly about the concert all last week. So when Rey had confessed what they’d done and the consequence of it, bracing for Paige’s rage at them getting Rose in trouble, the immediately-wide-awake Paige had just put her hands on Rey’s shoulders, looked her in eyes, and said,

*“You are not in trouble.”* Every word clear and precise. “Whoever took my sister is gonna be.”

Then, she bundled the teenagers into the rundown Corolla and forced her way into the Sheriff’s office.

Getting that ball rolling, seeing how fast the Sheriff had worked and

the strange looks and comments he and his deputy had shared, had both relieved Rey... and also terrified her even more.

Something was happening in Hawkins. Something big. Paige's pensive silence and heavy frown confirmed it as she drove the teenagers back to Starcruise Park and told them to go straight home. And to *not go looking* for Rose.

Finn and Poe weren't stupid, they had probably noticed the weirdness at the station and how it was so late, but everyone seemed to be so busy. *They* had been a lot more willing to let the adults handle it, though. To trust them to figure it all out and bring Rose home.

Rey wasn't so willing. Not when her stomach couldn't stop clenching and the look on the deputy's face kept flashing again and again in her mind.

*'Within the radius.'*

*'Fuck.'*

*What* radius? And what diner case? Cantina Pizzaria was downtown, close to the high school, and they all would've known if something had happened there. The only other diner was Kuuil's truckstop down by the interstate exit. Rey stopped in the middle of her pacing, closed her eyes, and tried to think about where the diner was in relation to the trailer park. It was east of downtown like Starcruise, but other than that they were nowhere near each other.

"AURGH!" Rey screamed and kicked her wall as hard as she could. The shitty plywood broke under her foot and she was *stuck in the freaking wall*. She flopped to her butt and began to shake, and shake, and *laugh*. Laugh until tears sprung at the corner of her eyes. Only the too-loud volume of the TV in the living room kept the Old Guy from screaming at her for *kicking a hole* into the wall. Outside her room, the phone rang while Rey gulped in breath and curled over her knees.

"Girl! GIRL, the PHONE," Old Guy screeched from the living room.

"Get it yourself!" Rey screamed back, wiping at her face with the heel

of her palm.

“Don’t you talk back to me! I feed you,”

“I clothe you, I give you a roof over your head,” Rey muttered under her breath along with her screeching guardian. She struggled to her feet, yanking out the one from the wall, and shuffled down the hall. The phone was in the kitchen, still ringing. She shot the Old Guy an irritated glare. “You’ll have to turn the TV down.”

“Rude little brat,” he mumbled, turning the volume down by, like, a single decibel.

She rolled her eyes and picked up the receiver, sniffing. “Yeah?”

*Sssshhhhhh*

Rey frowned and pressed the phone closer, plugging the opposite ear with her finger. “Hello?”

*Sssshhhhhh*

Only white noise. Wait, no.

Her heart leapt in her throat, thudded against her esophagus until she felt like vomiting. But, at the same time, she wanted to start crying again, relief almost knocking her down. “Rose? Rose, is it you?” she whispered, fingers clutching the phone desperately.

*Sssshhhh*

“Rose! Rose, please, say something, it’s me. It’s Rey. Rose?” Rey said louder, much louder this time. She ignored her granddad’s annoyed shout and held the phone so close to her ear that it started to hurt.

Just barely, under all the heavy static, was someone breathing.

“Rose, please, please say *something*, where are you?” Rey begged. “The cops are already looking for you, they’ll find you, I promise, just give me *something*.”

There was a rumble, a wet snarl, and an icy cold dread dripped down

Rey's spine. She felt like prey, like something hunted, as the snarling grew louder and the quiet breathing sharp and shrill.

"Rose, run, *run!* Whatever it is *run!*" Rey screamed. "You stay away from her, you bastard- *ah!*" She shrieked as the phone in her hand zapped her. Hard enough her teeth ached and the skin of her jaw *burned*. She clutched at her face, but snatched up the phone, hesitated for a blink, and pressed it back to her ear. "Rose! Rose? Are you there? Are you okay?" she shouted desperately.

There wasn't even a dial tone.

*"Damn it! FUCK!"*

She slammed it down. Then, slammed it again, again, shouting until the phone fell off the wall with a jangling clatter to the ground. She stared at it, chest heaving, phone receiver hanging from limp fingers as the curled phone cord swung in the air.

"What the *hell* is going on here?"

The Old Guy tottered into the kitchen doorway, leaning on his walker, his jaundiced yellow eyes gleaming in fury.

"It broke," Rey said simply. She dropped the receiver and walked away. She didn't even twitch at his screeching bloody murder at her back.

Rose was out there. Something was hunting her.

So Rey was gonna find her first.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

okay, so, the best part of this chapter was writing Din. omg, i had SO much fun writing in Din's POV. His scenes with Luke, and Dune, and HAN, OMG WITH HAN, were so fun. Luke is supposed to seem a little ooc, or remind you a bit more of ANH Luke. Just... go with it for now. All the characters are Star Wars verse characters. Even the teacher namedrop was from Clone Wars! You get a cookie if you

recognize them. (Also, Chewie's hound dog's name is a canon creature from Kashyyyk lol) The backstory with Finn, Rey, and Ben will be explained a bit more and they won't ALWAYS be so antagonistic. For me, Rey always seemed like a get pissed when emotions are high, calm down after a few wild swings of the saber stop working out kinda person (tldr: rage first, figure it out second), and that's what I'm trying to do here.

### 3. Tuesday Pt I

#### Summary for the Chapter:

The Kid shook his head again.

His lips pulled up on the side, and he held out his free hand, pinkie extended. “I pinkie promise I’ll be back. Here, like this.” Din showed the Kid how to link their pinkies together and lift them up and down. The Kid cooed curiously, making the up-down motion a few more times. Din’s smile grew the tiniest bit. “That’s right. I can’t break a pinkie promise. I have to come back.”

The Kid stared, mouth falling open and eyes wide.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

Some ableist language. See bottom notes for more

On the other side of Thanksgiving and staring down the barrel of the Christmas holiday, Hawkins was *cold*. Snow would be rolling in soon, and the air was already icy when breathed in too deep. Especially in the dark hours past midnight. Cara lit her cigarette with slightly numb fingers and leaned on the open door of her cruiser. Unlike the sheriff, she had a regular four-door sedan. The *binging* of the open-door signal normally grated on her nerves, but the silence around Kuiil’s Diner was heavy, *ominous* in a way it had never been before. Tonight, the open-door signal was a relief. Bodhi set his elbows on the tan roof on the other side of the cruiser, one foot propped up on the door and jiggling hard enough that the cruiser itself was trembling.

Cara turned to him with a sneer and hands cupped around the cherry-end of her cigarette to keep it safe from the night breeze.

“What? It’s *cold*. And... I get the willies just *looking*,” Bodhi admitted with a glance at the diner and a visible shudder going down his spine. It looked the same as it always did, a squat and low boxy-

looking building, windows gaping wide around the front and weeds growing out of the cracks in the pavement. The only differences were the square-ish neon sign was dark and the dim shimmer of yellow caution tape crossed the front door.

“The willies? Really? Ya gonna put that in your report?” Cara mocked, her sneer softer, more teasing. Bodhi huffed a small laugh, shrugging.

“If the shoe fits,” he muttered, so quiet she almost missed it under the incessant *pinging*.

“We should do another round ‘round the building. Teva and Ketter should be here in the next hour and we can finally head home,” Cara said. Being all empathetic and caring wasn’t her forte, but the logic was sound and it had the tension in Bodhi’s shoulders oozing away.

“Yeah, thank God. I know the overtime on this is gonna be high, but, *damn*, I dunno if it’s worth it,” Bodhi said, shoving away from the car and slamming the door shut.

“All we have to do is lose a little sleep and stare at an empty crime scene. What’s not worth it about that?” Cara said, chuckling and rolling her eyes. Her door shut, the *pinging* cut off abruptly, and that eerily heavy silence fell on them. Shrugged it off, Cara straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She offered the cigarette to Bodhi as they rounded the car hood, but he waved her off.

Cara took another drag before tossing it on the ground. “Check your piece.”

“Yeah, yeah.” But he checked his pistol and then loosened it a bit. So he was feeling it, too. Perhaps he had some gut instinct after all. “You’d think I was still just a rookie.”

Cara opened her mouth for yet another snarky remark about how he *was* still the rookie if no one new had joined on, but cut herself off. She and Bodhi both spun towards the diner, hands on their holsters, breaths caught jaggedly in their throats, as a light flickered. The only light at the diner was the city-placed street lamp at the back of the building. It was single bulb and old, but it still had a heck of a glow.



Until now, as it began to flicker, the dark lingering longer and longer.

“Fuck. Let’s get it over with before the thing blows,” Cara ordered, jerking her chin towards the building.

Bodhi nodded once, throat clicking audibly. Then, his jaw pulled taut and his eyes narrowed. He was a nervous, chatty wreck of a guy most of the time, so it was always a bit surprising to watch him pull on this veneer of calm resolution. He was a damn good partner that way, always coming through at the clutch. Keeping their hands on their holsters, they made their way through the flickering gloom. Cara could feel her heartbeat ratcheting higher, every near-silent slide of her boot over gravel sounding like a foghorn in her ears, broadcasting her location to everything... to *anything* out there. There was a rustle of something over leaves, and Cara hissed a cuss word, spinning to plant both feet flat on the ground, arms raised with the handgun drawn and safety off, eyes wide and mouth a thin tight line as she stared into the forest around them.

The street lamp went out. Then, began to flicker so quickly each motion seemed to be slower, moving incrementally between each blink of the street lamp.

There was a muttered curse from Bodhi, muffled further by the distance and the building between them, but still loud enough to make Cara smirk. She backed up, heels hitting the building at her back, arms still up without a single quiver. But her breathing was too damn loud, rasping and rough as it escaped her mouth. The shadowy figure in the woods was gone, but...

That silence got heavier. The light blinked *faster*, she could hear it clicking wildly, her heart beat rising with it. She squinted, as if that would help, but the trees only looked as if they were moving between flashes of light. *Something* had been out there and she couldn't *fucking* see.

There was another sound, something wet and... dog-like. A snarl. Then, a sharp gasp and gurgle.

Something slid. And then something thumped.

And the light blinked out with a final click.

Cara barely managed to pull one hand off her pistol, every muscle and instinct screaming that there was something *dangerous* here, to grip the sides of the radio at her shoulder. “Deputy Rook, was that your side of the building? Come in, Deputy Rook?”

The radio didn’t so much as *ssshhh* in reply. She frowned and began to sidle to the side, keeping the building at her back and her eyes darting around, gun high and unwavering. Again, she pressed at the radio buttons, double-tapping and squeezing, stupidly shaking the damn thing.

A rustle of leaves and the light above began to flicker back on. The glow now steady, electricity humming innocently.

The radio buzzed to life and Cara grabbed at it. Her palms were sweaty and her heart was racing faster. She had to lick her lips just to get words out of her too-dry mouth. “Deputy Rook, you there? Bodhi?”

*Sssshhhh*

“*Fuck.*” Cara moved faster, all but running. She hadn’t felt this high-alert since the raid on that damn meth lab four years ago. There had been a huge chance that any of those chemicals could go off like a bomb and *none* of them had had the right kind of training to deal with that. Yet now... this was worse. Every hair on her body was standing on end, and that quiet gurgle she’d heard was repeating over and over in her head. She *knew* what that sound was, why did she know? And why the shit wasn’t Bodhi answering? She made her way around corners, pointing quickly to clear the area, then sidling forward against the wall, constantly looking towards the trees. Where that figure had been. Where the leaves had rustled and something had *sarled*.

The last corner and she stood motionless directly under the street light. But Bodhi wasn’t there.

“*The fuck!?*” She hurried forward, eyes searching the ground, gun up and muscles *burning* as she kept fighting gravity. There... past the

gravel.... the leaves had been disturbed, and two deep grooves were cut through the dirt. Breath all but panting, Cara crouched low and slowly made her way closer, eyes darting from the ground to the treeline.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and she yowled like a cat as her elbow went high and cracked into bone.

“Whad the hell, Dune!” Teva shouted, hand over his bloodied nose and eyes wide at the gun pointed directly between his eyes. Next to him, Ketter had her hands up, her dark eyes wary and her hair pulled back in its impeccably perfect bun.

“*Shit*, sorry. There’s something out here. Bodhi—When did you two get here?”

“Like doo sheconds ago,” Teva slurred. Ketter sighed and tipped his head slightly forward.

“Pinch your nose and stop talking. What’s going on, Dune?”

“Rook’s missing. He should be *here*,” Dune said, gesturing around them. Teva and Ketter winced slightly and she realized her gun was still in her hand. She should have holstered it, but she couldn’t imagine letting it go now. Her skin still crawled with the forest at her back.

Ketter narrowed her eyes and began to search the area, hand on her own holster. Teva dug in his pockets for a handkerchief as blood dripped onto his beard. There was a sharp inhale and Teva and Cara looked over to see Ketter staring at the diner’s wall. She put her mouth close to her shoulder radio and her voice actually shook.

“We need techs at Kuil’s Diner. We need them now.”

Cara followed Ketter’s upward gaze. Her stomach bottomed out.

Up high above their heads, over the decades of weathered off-white paint, the unmistakable splatter of wet arterial spray.

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A phone ringing had Din jerking awake and almost falling onto the floor. He groaned, rubbing his face and immediately shivering the moment he kicked the scratchy wool quilt off. Despite covering the two broken windows with tarp and as much duct as he could, sleeping right next to a broken window at the end of November was *not* going to be warm. He hadn't even been able to truly appreciate sleeping on a mattress for the first time in over a week.

Stumbling from his room, he rushed to the phone hanging on the wall between the living room and kitchen.

"What," he grunted, clearing his throat. Around the wall and across the living room a tiny figure curled up on the couch peeked out from three layers of blankets. His eyes glittered like a wild animal's in the moonlight—too wide, too awake.

"Din, you need to get to the office now," Dune said on the other line. She sounded exhausted—which was expected, and shaken—which was not.

"What happened?"

"It's Bodhi."

His stomach sank and guilt clawed at his throat. In minutes, he was in the day before yesterday's uniform—wrinkled to hell and back was better than ketchup stains and jalapeno juice wet spots on his ass—and shoving his gun in the holster under his arm. The kid on the couch whimpered, the whole pile of blankets visibly shivering. Din sighed and crouched between coffee table and couch, ignoring the gnawing to go go go in his gut and the ache in his knees.

He frowned a bit, wondering what name to give and just settled for: "Kid, I'm going to be back." Little fingers, nails jagged and torn, peeled apart the blankets and those cat eyes gleamed in the darkness. "I'll bring more Eggos." Hesitantly, he placed a hand at the top of the lump where the Kid's head probably was.

An interested grumble replied.

“Yeah, Eggos. Stay warm. *Don’t* leave, got it? People can’t know you’re here. If you get hungry, there’s some bananas left. You put the skins *in* the garbage can if you eat any.”

The bundle shivered all over and the Kid nodded slowly. When Din moved to get up, a hand braced on the coffee table and a tiny groan under his breath, the Kid’s hand shot out to grab Din’s wrist. His eyebrows rose as the Kid shook his head and tugged Din down harder. Din couldn’t help the small huff.

“I gotta go, Kid. I’ll be back.”

The Kid shook his head again.

His lips pulled up on the side, and he held out his free hand, pinkie extended. “I pinkie promise I’ll be back. Here, like this.” Din showed the Kid how to link their pinkies together and lift them up and down. The Kid cooed curiously, making the up-down motion a few more times. Din’s smile grew the tiniest bit. “That’s right. I can’t break a pinkie promise. *I have* to come back.”

The Kid stared, mouth falling open and eyes wide. He made the motions again, so vigorously Din almost lost balance, startling an actual laugh out of him.

“There we go.” He rubbed the top of the Kid’s head, making the blankets ruffle, and the boy grinned, the sides of his mouth twitching awkwardly and nose wrinkling. “If you wake up and I’m still not home, that’s the TV. You turn that dial right there and it’ll turn on. You can watch whatever you want.”

The grin faltered and the Kid stared at the overly large and mostly wooden old set. It was more than twenty years old, but it worked. The Kid made a questioning little noise, head tilted, then yawned hard enough his eyes were a bit teary afterwards.

“Sleep, Kid.”

Grumbling and chuffing, the Kid snuggled back into a little ball while Din rose inelegantly to his feet once more. He exhaled roughly though his nose, smiling a bit, and stopped for only a second to look

back at the couch. Then, he was out the door and driving to the station, mouth a thin, taut line and eyebrows furrowed.

Din stared at the report in front of him. He closed his eyes, rubbed his face, and stared at it again. Across his desk, Dune slumped low, legs spread, dark smudges under her eyes and hair a rat's nest around her haggard face. She should've been home already. Hours ago.

And so should have Bodhi.

"It doesn't make sense," Din muttered.

"Yeah, you're not the only one who knows I should be dead, too," Dune snapped.

Din met her blazing gaze silently. Her mouth twisted and she turned away with a scoff. But not fast enough for Din to miss the suspicious shine in her eyes.

"Dune, go home."

"You're *shitting* me!"

Din held up a hand. Dune's mouth snapped shut as she crossed her arms over her chest, mouth a thin white line, and eyebrows connecting over a fierce scowl. He got to his feet to make his way to her side.

"It's been nearly 24 hours, you're well past overtime. Mostly, you need to not be *here* right now," he said at last, his hand settling on her shoulder. She was still tense, her biceps all but popping the hems of her short shirt sleeves, muscles sharply defined and hard beneath his hand. Gently, he squeezed before letting his hand drop away.

All at once, Dune's shoulders slumped and she let out a deep, slow breath.

"You're right. Fuck, when did I last sleep," she muttered, half-

laughing and dragging a hand through the lank mess of dark hair. Hands clapping her thighs, she heaved herself out of her chair. She grabbed her hat where she'd tossed it on his desk and shoved it on her head, then slowly rolled her shoulders and neck, working out kinks and knots. "What time you want me back?"

Din stepped back to lean against his desk, both hands gripping the edge on either side of his hips. He sighed, looking away and frowning.

"I can't give you too much time. IA is gonna be here eventually and they're gonna need more than your written statement," Din admitted. Dune scowled. "I can give you until after lunch. One 'o clock."

"You know I'd be back at eight if I could," Dune said, mirroring his earlier action: one hand on his shoulder and squeezing gently. He nodded shortly. "See you at one, boss. Don't let the night crew piss you off."

He huffed, rolling his eyes at her back as she walked out his door. His eyes rose to the clock. It was barely 2 AM now, and he had crime techs to talk to, bereaved to call, and an Internal Affairs visit to prepare for. The paperwork alone would take forever. Somewhere in there, he'd have to get back home to feed a kid he shouldn't be keeping secret, and an officer, a *friend*, to mourn. His chest clenched, that familiar feeling of self-loathing and guilt churning stomach acid and burning him from the inside out.

Bodhi had barely been in his twenties. One of his youngest officers. He was Din's *first* hire, recommended by the previous Sheriff and the now retired medical examiner whom Bodhi had somehow made a good impression on during his academy weeks and the interning he did during high school. He'd been taking college courses, using his meager pay as a police officer to work towards eventually becoming a crime scene tech, or even an ME one day like his old mentor, Erso. Instead he was missing, and the only thing left of him was enough blood evidence to prove he was most likely already dead. At twenty-three.

Din had had a slice of cake on his birthday less than six months ago.

He didn't know how long he stood there, his face buried in one hand, the other gripping the desk so hard his fingers went numb. But when he looked up, mouth hard and eyes dry, he went straight to his desk and began henpecking his way through the reports on his typewriter. The faster this shit was done, the faster he could return to the crime scene—double crime scene now—and figure out for himself how the tracks could just... *stop*.

Around four, one of the night crew—who really were good folk, the competitiveness between them and the day crew was ridiculous—had brought him in a mug of coffee. It wasn't quite Dune's sludge, but it wasn't great. It got him through his reports and an hour out at the crime scene. Suddenly it was dawn, and he was glaring down at the crime scene photos, Kuiil's ME report, the Tico girl's APB (of course, there hadn't been hide nor hair of her seen), as well as Omera's statement on the Kid, wondering what the hell was going on and how these very different cases were connected. In the bullpen was a perfectly good corkboard he could use, spread it all out, maybe see if he could connect them. Ketter was a sergeant with years of a detective work under her belt and would probably be better than him at this, but... the less people talked about the Kid the better. There was something... something *off*...

The feeling of flying through the air, the thud of the floor to his back as he gasped aloud, the crash of a gun through his window. The mere out-stretching of a tiny boy's hand.

His office door slammed open. Din was half-standing, cold dregs whatever number coffee dropped to the ground, hand on his empty holster, before he realized the intruder was already talking a mile a minute.

"I know you said I wasn't a detective, and you didn't want to go out searching with me, but I have *proof* I'm right, Djarin!" Luke said, slamming a pile of papers on Din's desk. Luke paused. His eyes stared down at Din's hand on the holster, dragged upwards over his defensive stance, and finally met Din's gaze with his eyebrows slowly rising. "Were you expecting someone else?"



"I was expecting *no one*," Din snapped. Luke rolled his eyes. "You realize it's not even 6 AM?"

"And I knew you were here," Luke said with a careless shrug. Din pinched the bridge of his nose, the tension in his body abruptly cut and shoulders slumped.

"Stop listening to police scanners."

"It doesn't matter, pay attention," Luke retorted. He was already around the desk, shoving aside all the reports and photos Din had been studying to replace them with all of his own. "Han and I checked. All the people we talked to, or we confirmed through Chewie, 'cuz you know those woodsy hermit guys only talk to other woodsy hermit guys, but *everyone* that we got ahold of within the two mile radius of the lab confirmed their power went out yesterday." Luke slammed his hand down on the yellow legal pad he had in emphasis. Most of the writing looked more like Han's loopy, wild handwriting, completely ignoring the lines and margins, than Luke's more crabbed and slanted chickenscratch.

"Solo wasn't calling these people in the middle of the night, was he?" Din asked, already imagining the annoyed calls Mythrol was going to be fielding all day.

"What? Of course not. He was working on this all day while writing up the article," Luke said with a frown. "He can be an asshole, but not when he's trying to get something he *wants*."

Din wanted to laugh at that, but he too busy being annoyed.

"Skywalker—"

"Why are you saying it like that? I just proved I'm right. Well, Han and Chewie did. The lab *is* a place of interest now. You can't deny that."

"I already knew about this. I actually can do my job, Luke," Din said. Luke's mouth wrenched open, but Din spoke over it, waving his hand at the paper pad. "The power outage isn't my priority. Tico and the two *murders* happening in my backyard within eighteen hours of each

other, *those* are my priorities.”

“But look, it’s connected to Rose!” Luke struggled a second to flip a few pages and not toss the pad aside on accident with a single hand.

That’s when Din noticed Luke wasn’t wearing his hook. Or that one that looked like a hand but didn’t function quite as well. Eyes narrowing, Din took in the Beatles shirt under his hemp wool sweater, the mud and leaf splattered jeans, the even muddier moccasins, and the dark gold, sweat-dampened hair sticking to his temple and the back of his neck. Luke was all but vibrating from head to toe, eyes a little too wide and bloodshot, and his bottom lip was torn to shreds. Just under his nostril were the traces of dried blood.

“Luke.”

“See, three forty-two. The people that had electric analog clocks were all stuck at 3:42, and everyone else guessed it was probably around that time or they were dead asleep and had no idea, but it definitely happened while they were sleeping.”

Din startled and stared down at the paper. Sure enough, about a dozen people from around east Hawkins all said their clocks stopped at the same time. Din grabbed the Tico report and scowled.

“You *have* to investigate that lab!” Luke said fiercely, voice heavy and dark in a way Din had never heard it before. His bloodshot blue eyes were boring without flinching into Din’s when he looked up. “Starcruise isn’t that far from the lab either, definitely within two miles. Someone from the lab, the guards, the scientists, *whoever*, they could’ve been out there, in the woods, and Rose was just in the wrong place and at the wrong time.”

“Why would they even be in the woods? Why would *she* be in the woods? They’re not *hunters*, they’re not government spooks, Luke, they’re scientists.”

“What about being scientists makes them *not* government spooks?” Luke shot back. He looked away, eyes falling to the legal pad. “They’re the worst ones. They’ve got a *cause*, a *just* one. The

betterment of mankind. And the military is pretty damn good at covering shit up for the betterment of mankind and *freedom*.” He spat the words out, shoulders tense and high, his hand curling into a fist as his arm shook.

Silence fell for the first time since Luke barged in. Din glanced at the handwritten notes, the Tico report, and finally to the back of Luke’s head and his shaking shoulders. Exhaling roughly through his nose, Din put the report down, next to Luke’s fist, and set a hand on Luke’s shoulder. Unlike Dune, Luke didn’t relax.

He flinched, inhaling sharply. Pretending like that reaction didn’t stab him in the gut, or send the hair along the back of his neck standing on end—Luke had never *flinched* from him before—Din crossed his arms over his chest.

“This isn’t enough.”

Luke’s head rose, fury making his blue eyes gleam like ice. “Excuse me.”

“This is circumstantial at best, Skywalker. Not *proof*. There’s no reason a bunch of military scientists would be out in the woods, kidnapping teenage girls in the middle of the night. Did you find so much as a *footprint* while you and your dog were out there wasting your time and *not* sleeping?”

“Are you—”

“I’m not kidding.”

Luke looked slapped, mouth hanging open. His bangs, what weren’t stuck to his forehead with sweat, fell into his wide eyes.

“You can’t believe this is *coincidence*!” Luke shouted, knocking the pad under his knuckles.

The phone ringing had them both jumping. Again, Din’s hand reached for the holster that was still empty until he got control of himself and huffed a sigh. Luke’s hand was held up, fingers spread wide, and his chest heaving as he stared at the phone. With a glance at Luke’s oddly familiar motion, Din leaned over the desk and picked

up the phone. Luke was already shuffling through the papers, paler than ever, his eyes more and more red-rimmed and bloodshot.

“Djarin.”

*“As welcoming as ever. Aren’t small town supposed to be more hospitable.”*

“... Kryze?” Din asked, pulling his phone away to stare at it incredulously. Luke’s head jerked up and he shuffled closer. Din’s spine went stiff, eyebrows rising, as Luke unashamedly pressed in so close their chests were touching and he was on his tiptoes to get his ear closer to the phone. Meaning their noses all but brushed. Seeing Din’s look, Luke raised an eyebrow, as if daring him to push Luke away. “Now is not the time to try and recruit me again.”

*“Don’t think so highly of yourself. The exact opposite is happening, Djarin,”* she retorted in her sharp and judgmental snap of a voice. Luke’s other eyebrow rose and they exchanged another look. Until Din put the pieces together and closed his eyes. If Luke wasn’t in the way, he’d be pinching the bridge of his nose. *“HQ already approached me and Reeves about getting assigned to your ass-end of nowhere. Something about a disappearance and two murders in less than a day. One of them your own officer?”*

“You have got to be *joking*,” Din grunted, slumping against his desk and Luke scowled at the phone. “Why would Quantico care about Hawkins? Or send agents out so fast? The second... it just happened a few hours ago.” He stumbled over calling Bodhi Rook a *body*. Not just because there wasn’t one in the morgue.

*“Which is why I’m giving you heads up, Djarin. Keep up.”*

“She knows something’s weird,” Luke whispered. Din covered Luke’s mouth with his hand and frowned at him. He only rolled his eyes again.

Din was getting really sick of Luke doing that.

*“My boss isn’t saying much, but me and Reeves can read between the lines. The military has a foothold in your shitty little town, for whatever*

*reason, and whatever is happening there is setting off alarms with the higher ups. They're worried about whatever assets they have there."*

The triumph on Luke's face lit up his blue eyes. If Din wasn't covering his mouth, he'd probably be smirking like a smug little shit.

"How much time do I have?"

*"Most likely? Probably twenty-four hours. If another dead body shows up? However long it takes for a couple FBI agents to fly in."*

"Shit," Din breathed out. Luke nodded, eyebrows lowering and gaze dark.

*"You said it. You think I want to come clean up your mess in a town that doesn't even have decent coffee? Get your shit together, Djarin, or I'll see you soon."*

The line went dead. Din dropped his hand from Luke's mouth while also dropping the phone back in the cradle. When he stood straight, Luke hadn't yet moved, just scrubbed a hand through his hair. His breath was hot and damp against the front of Din's shirt, and he could smell the heavy scent of trees and wet dirt and sweat. He looked ready to go right back out there, or throw himself through the doors of that lab. He also looked two seconds from falling flat on his face.

"I doubt a warrant will be possible. As much of an asshole you were, you're right about it being circumstantial," Luke said it with a wry little grin, teeth baring like a wild animal. "And if they're sending agents so fast, then they don't want to give you time to get better."

"Yeah, I got that."

"So, admit it. I'm right," Luke demanded, thumping his wrist against Din's chest and smirking. There it was.

"I am *not* admitting that," Din said, grabbing Luke's wrist and lowering it. The ridges of scar tissue slid under Din's thumb and he had to fight the urge to stroke over Luke's skin, trying to slow the too rapid pulse under his fingers. "It could just be the government being overzealous."

“You—are you—*Djarin*, how much evidence has to be thrown in your face for you to admit I might be right about this? You aren’t *smarter* than me because you went to college for a few years and I was the military brat,” Luke said, getting up on his toes to meet Din’s weary eyes.

“Luke, I’ve never said that. There’s just no *reason*—”

“You’re forgetting about the other kid, the little boy,” Luke said. Din bit down on his tongue, trying desperately not to look at Luke, but *knowing* he was giving himself away with each frantic flicker of his eyes around his office. Luke glanced over Din’s face, his anger slowly sliding into confusion as he fell back on his heels. “You haven’t mentioned that boy this entire time. He was in a hospital gown, Din. And Kuil’s Diner is closer to the lab than Starcruise Park is. A desperate kid like that? He could have escaped from there, kept running, until he got to Kuil’s.”

“Luke.” Din stepped back and placed his hands on Luke’s shoulders. Physically forcing distance. “You’re connecting a lot of dots that *don’t make sense*. A gunned down man? A killing with a sharp implement in the same place? Two missing kids of vastly different ages and descriptions?” He forced the last question out, trying not to choke on it.

Luke scowled, eyes darting away from Din’s. He stared down at the notes and reports on the desk.

“You *knew* her,” Din said, hands squeezing harder. Luke inhaled shakily, eyes closing. “And you’ve got a grudge about that lab. You’ve hated it since the moment the Mayor announced it was coming.”

Luke’s eyes snapped back open, that softly vulnerable expression gone in a second. Replacing it was something harder, angrier, blue eyes flashing and cold.

“This is not about a *grudge*. I can’t—I can’t just connect those dots, I get that, but *you* can’t ignore that the lab is smack in the middle of this, *literally*, and Kryze is going to be here in a day or less if you don’t get your head out of your ass and *listen* to me.”

"Give me better proof than years of your own paranoia and PTSD, and I'll listen," Din said bluntly. That slithering hot flash of guilt clawed at his stomach at the full body cringe Luke made. He stumbled back a few steps, the warmth of his body gone and making Din feel abruptly, horribly cold when that icy gaze sliced through his suddenly too thin skin.

"*Fuck you*," Luke hissed, and Din reeled back. "You don't... you don't know *anything* of what I've."

"I shouldn't have—" Din tried to interrupt, stepping forward. Luke's hand on his chest, flat and immovable, stopped him.

"But you did."

"Have you even *looked* at yourself, Luke?" Din snapped, gesturing with a hand at Luke's entire body. Luke scowled furiously at a distance corner, gnawing at his bottom lip. "You haven't slept, you probably haven't eaten either, and this lab, this same lab you've been trying to close down for *years*, is in the middle of several open cases, some of them murder. Whether or not you're right, *this is not your job*, and you're running yourself ragged chasing shadows."

"So I'm crazy," Luke spat, dropping his hand and stepping back further. "That's what you're saying. Poor Skywalker, he was the *golden* boy but he couldn't hack it in the jungle. Came back *nutty* because he couldn't handle murdering those damn commis."

"I didn't say that," Din protested hotly, but voice soft. Luke still wasn't looking at him. His bottom lip was bleeding where a bit of skin had been ripped away.

"But that *is* what you're saying. Chasing shadows? Right? Still fighting the congs in the forest. Blaming the military for *ruining my life* and watching all my friends die by machetes, must've made me just another crazy vet."

"Stop ignoring what I *actually* said, Skywalker. When did you last sleep?"

Luke shook his head roughly. "It doesn't matter."

"You think I don't know about the nightmares, Luke?" Din asked quietly.

Luke spun around and strode for the door. Din watched him go, his one hand braced on the desk the only thing keeping him standing, or from following. As if feeling Din's eyes, Luke froze at the door, shoulders tense and high.

"I know what this town thinks of me. I know what they say when they think I can't hear. I know no one believes a damn word I say," he said, so quiet and soft it was almost inaudible. But Din heard it like a shout and his eyes closed, holding back the bile in his throat and burning the back of his nose. "I didn't think you were one of them."

The office door opened and closed with barely a *snick* of the knob clicking into place. Early morning sunlight was pouring in through the door's glass panel, lighting up the pens and glossy, bloody photos, casting shadows under the curled edges of papers. Rose Tico was smiling from her black and white picture in the APB report, and Din fell slowly into his chair. He buried his face in both hands, breathing slow and silent, dragging in air through his teeth. He came to Hawkins because the weight in Indianapolis had been too much. The weight of so many people's disappointment and broken families, feeling like every choice he made was the wrong one. In all honesty, he'd come back to Hawkins with his tail between his legs. It didn't matter what medal he'd won, or the promotions he'd gotten, or the forgiveness he'd been given, none of it had sat right. None of it had felt earned.

Hawkins was a place to hide. Where people knew his name, but they remembered the fuck-up teen with a motorcycle and leather jacket. Most outside of the sheriff and mayor's office hadn't known his Indianapolis reputation, and their expectations had been low. His election had been run mostly by the previous sheriff and *Organa*, whom had somehow decided his record spoke for itself despite what had felt like a *terrible* first impression.

Now, somehow, he was in the middle of something he never could have imagined. Pushing away people who looked at him and *expected* things from him. Or hiding them in his living room and



crossing his fingers. The niggling sense of panic, *fight or flight*, prodding at him.

Shoving away from his desk with a grunt, he got to his feet. Something rolled away when the toe of his boot hit it, and he frowned down at the long forgotten puddle of coffee, the mug rolling to a stop at the wall. All the papers were stuffed into one folder before he stepped over the mess.

“Sheriff, sir, is everything—?”

Din raised a hand to cut off Teva when the older man hurried to stand from his desk.

“I’ll be back at eight.” He grabbed his coat and hat, juggling everything for a few minutes, then clamped the folder between his elbow and side tightly.

“Of course, I’ll let Iggy know.”

Din left without another word. Someone would clean up the coffee, or he would later. He couldn’t give a damn right then.

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That morning, Rey woke feeling as if she’d never slept. Not in the way that she was loopy or exhausted, although somewhere in her mind she knew she probably was, but in that strange wide-awake way. Where each movement was fast and sharp, nothing dragged down by the residue—or lack—of sleep. And there was one thing on her mind. Something that she woke up *knowing*. As if she’d known it the entire time and just needed a few minutes with her eyes closed to remember. She grabbed the first clean clothes her hands fell on, rushing out the door in her rattiest pair of jeans and Joy Division t-shirt over her usual thin, long-sleeve undershirt that were completely unsuitable for the weather.

Breakfast was the last thing on her mind, her feet already heading for the door when she was called back. Only the fact it *wasn’t* the Old

Guy's voice, but instead his full-time caretaker, that Rey actually stopped and trudged towards him. Mr. Bestoon was cutting bananas, lips pursed and eyes minuscule behind his coke-bottle glasses.

"I noticed that the phone is unusable."

Rey glanced towards the phone where it was still lying on its side, the receiver next to it like a discarded toy. There was a bit of a hole on the wall where drywall had been torn out when the phone had... fallen...

"Yup." Rey snagged an apple and shrugged. "It was broken."

"Before or after your temper tantrum?" Mr. Bestoon asked, his thin and pale blonde eyebrow rising.

"It shocked me so hard half my face was numb," Rey explained. Her mouth twisted to the side, phantom pains tracking up her jaw in remembrance. "And then the dial tone was gone."

"Thus, you punched it off the wall."

"More like... hit a few times."

Mr. Bestoon sighed and set aside the banana peel and knife. Then, he turned with a much too serious frown and a quiet *tsk*. Rey took a bite of the apple and tried her best not to roll her eyes. She knew exactly what was coming now.

"Your grandfather requires rest and relaxation and *care*, child. You are all that's left of his family now, it's your duty as his granddaughter to take care of him when I cannot be here," he scolded, using the same tired monologue she'd heard ever since the state placed her with the Old Guy. In other words, most of her *life*. If it weren't for Finn, and now Rose and Poe, Rey would've wished they had just sent her to a foster home or orphanage. "You should act like the bright young lady you are and treat your grandfather with respect."

"Did he mention while spitting out how much he hates me that my *best friend is missing*?" Rey asked dryly. She made sure her mouth was still mostly full, enjoying the look of disgust that pinched Bestoon's

features tight. His expression smoothed back into one of faux-concern and sympathy.

“Your grandfather doesn’t hate you, don’t be silly.” *Silly*, like she was a dumb little girl. She took another bite of apple, big enough she had to chew with her mouth open. “And you reckless children were out late at night and being irresponsible, what exactly were you expecting?”

Rey turned on her heel and stomped away. Bestoon merely sighed, so *patronizingly* disappointed in her. She grabbed her coat and bag and was jumping off the top of the steps before he could try to call her back. Not like she would go back. Shrugging the conversation off like a horse flicks off a fly, Rey strode towards Finn’s. By the time her foot hit the bottom step, he was outside, yawning and blinking bloodshot eyes.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Rey asked, smile lopsided and humorless. Finn returned it with a shake of his head.

“Not at all. Coach is gonna be pissed.”

Rey bit her lip to keep the retort of ‘who cares’ back. Being pissed at Bestoon and the Old Guy didn’t mean she should jump down Finn’s throat. Besides, a second later he was rubbing the back of his neck and scoffing, saying for her,

“Not that I can give a crap about football right now. I keep thinking about Rose, how it’s *my* fault—”

“I already told you to *stop* that. It’s not your fault, Finn. Whoever... whatever took her, that’s what did it,” Rey said darkly.

Gravel crunched under their shoes, and Finn’s small startle and head twist towards her had her breath speeding up. The sound of that wet snarl and Rose’s panicked breath rang in her ears, and it spilled out of her. Every detail she could remember, down to the shock and her... well, Bestoon had been right about one thing, her *temper tantrum*.

“Ochi needs to stop acting like he’s your uncle or dad or whatever the

hell he thinks he is,” Finn grumbled at the end of her story. Rey stared at him, fingernails cutting in the skin of the apple still clutched in her hands. Juice oozed over her fingers, down her palms and wrists, but she didn’t twitch. Finn met her burning gaze, glanced away, and rubbed the back of his neck again. “You... You sure about this, Rey? You just heard *breathing*.”

“It was *Rose*. You think I wouldn’t know, Finn? You know... you *know* how close we are, we run the batteries down on our walkies every night just talking, I’ve fallen asleep to her breathing almost every weekend for a *year*. She’s... She’s *Rose*. I *know* it was her, Finn, just like I’d know if it was you,” Rey said fiercely, all but pleading at the end. Finn nodded, lips pressing together as he frowned pensively.

“So she can get to a phone and can’t talk and there was... an animal there? We gotta tell the cops, Rey.”

“You barely believe me, why would they? And those asshats I live with won’t help. They’ll say I’m going crazy, or I’m dumb teenage girl who’s all hysterical or something.”

“We should tell Paige at least—”

“We can’t,” Rey interrupted, shaking her head. “She won’t even be in Hawkins today. She told me she’s gonna be making poster copies and taking them around all the towns nearby, and the bus stations, and maybe even going into Indianapolis. You can’t just hide a whole *teenager* in Hawkins. They all think whoever did it took her away.”

“Or that she ran away. I heard ‘em. Some of the deputies yesterday...” Finn said, frowning harder. Rey snorted and kicked a pebble away. The growl of car came from down the road, and they both looked up to see the glimmer of red. “Fine, okay, so what’s your plan then?”

“Her *walkie*.” Rey’s green eyes glittered like gemstones, lips curling into an excited smirk.

“Her what?”

“Her walkie was missing, Finn! I’m sure of it. I didn’t notice it

yesterday when we were talking to Paige, or I did but I didn't *realize* I noticed it, but it *wasn't there*. Wherever she is, I think she has it!"

"That's... that's impossible, Rey," Finn said slowly. "If someone took her, they would've taken that first."

"I don't think anyone did," Rey said. She closed her eyes as that cold dread slipped down her spine.

"You think she *ran away*?"

"No, Finn, no," Rey stepped closer as Poe pulled up even with them. Finn's eyes widened and she whispered, "She's *hiding*. From whatever I heard on the phone last night."

"Rey... what?"

The door shoved open and Poe was leaning over the passenger seat, sunshades sliding down his nose. While he wasn't quite as red-eyed as Finn, or as pale as Rey, he was a lot more unkempt than his usual impeccable appearance. His morning greeting grin was barely a twitch of his mouth, and there were smudges beneath his dark eyes.

"What's this pow-wow about?" he asked, forcing that pathetic smile into something a little more amused.

Finn stared at Rey. Her trembling mouth and shining eyes and wan face. She felt stretched thin with a fierce determination burning in the pit of her stomach, in every vein in her body. She felt like she had years ago, when she had only been in Hawkins for a few months and she had already realized how little her only family cared, and she'd fallen while playing and broke her arm. She had been hellbent on getting to the hospital on her own, on her own two feet, at barely six years old. No way would she let that Old Guy who sneered down on her and called her dead mother *trash* take care of her in any way. She'd gotten a full mile down the road when Finn and his parents had found her, scooped her up into their rusty and rattling minivan, and taken her in. She had barely made a sound the entire time, just held her arm close and gritted her teeth as tears poured down her face.

Like back then, Finn took one look at her drawn face and clenched

teeth, and nodded.

“If someone has a walkietalkie, but they haven’t been able to use it, why do you think they can’t?” Finn asked.

Rey grinned, all her teeth baring wolfishly. She threw her arms around him and hugged tight enough he gasped and laughed breathlessly.

“Huh? What?” Poe blurted, eyebrow rising. “Are you guys gettin’ in or what?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Finn said, his own teeth baring in a wide grin.

“You believe me!” Rey said, ducking into the car quickly and pulling the passenger seat back. She definitely preferred when the top was down on the car, but it was way too cold for that as it got further into December.

“Of course, Rey. Always. And I got an idea.” The door slammed as Finn got in, throwing his bags—sports duffle and book bag—to the foot well.

“What is it?” she asked eagerly, grabbing the shoulder of each front seat and leaning forward.

“What are you two even talking about?” Poe asked, putting the car into gear and U-turning back into town.

“Rose, duh,” Rey replied, rolling her eyes. Poe jerked around, eyes darting between the two of them in surprise, before quickly looking back at the road.

“If she’s got the walkie and she’s not using it, then there’s only a couple’a reasons why,” Finn pointed out, energy rising as he spoke, eyes lighting up. “One, the batteries are dead. Or two, she’s outta range.”

“It could be reason one, we use the walkie all the time,” Rey muttered, biting on her thumb nail.

“Would she have grabbed it if she couldn’t use it?”

“In this *hypothetical* situation that she somehow grabbed it and still has it right now while being *kidnapped*, I doubt she had time to check the batteries. You guys are jokin’, right? You don’t honestly think she’s got that?” Poe asked, frowning and glancing at them from the corner of his eye.

“We’re *not* joking. And if it’s hypothetical anyway, let’s hypothetically assume it’s got full batteries. We can assume the best first,” Rey said decisively.

“Which means it’s *out of range*,” Finn burst out. “And I know for a *fact* we can get *in range* and we have exactly what we need at school.”

“I am definitely missing something here, and I expect one of you to fill me in, but I’m on board. What do we need?” Poe asked. This time, his grin was a lot wider, his Sports Ace and Mr. Popular grin. He took the next turn a little too sharply, as if he couldn’t get to school fast enough.

“Rose told me the AV Club just got a brand new radio. It’s called, I dunno, a heathcliff shack or something,” Finn said.

“Pretty sure Heathcliff was the angry dude in that book we read in English class,” Poe correctly mildly.

“*Whatever*,” Finn and Rey said simultaneously. Poe chuckled.

“The AV Club’s new toy can reach *Australia*,” Finn added hotly.

Rey’s jaw dropped. “Are you... Are you serious?”

“Yeah, Rose was super excited about it. She only didn’t tell you because... yanno, she’s in that club with *Ben*.”

“Yeah, I forget everything she tells me when it has to do with that guy. *Oh no*,” Rey groaned and fell back into her seat, thumping her head against the headrest. “That means we’re gonna need *him*.”

“Yeah, I definitely can’t use a Heathcliff radio,” Poe agreed.

“You said that was a dude in a book.”

“We don’t know what it’s actually called, so angry dude will have to work for now.”

“*Whatever*, the radio thing that Rose talked about. We have to ask *him* for help? I’ve already talked to him once this week,” Rey whined.

“We could ask Mr. Fisto, he’s the AV Club advisor... but he’ll wanna stick around, probably, and that’s if he lets us in at all,” Poe said. He coasted into the high school parking lot and his usual spot nearest the cafeteria. The engine cut off and he braced his hand on the back of Finn’s seat to turn and look at Rey in back. “He’ll help you if you ask *nicely*.”

“I’m nice,” Rey mumbled, face burning a little as she slouched in the back seat.

“To me and Rose and Poe, and no one else.”

Rey stuck her tongue out at Finn, whom just grinned. The normal bickering and humor ebbed away too quickly, leaving Rey staring at the holes in her jeans and her arms wrapped tight around her torso. Finn’s hand covered her knee, palm warm and familiar and reassuring in its weight.

“He’s her friend, too, you heard him. He’s a jerk to me, but Rose is more important than you havin’ my back and hatin’ my enemies. Just for today,” Finn said softly. Their eyes met and Rey sighed, the loose strand of her limp hair fluttering over her nose.

“Just for today. If he’s a dick, I’m gonna punch ‘im the moment we don’t need him anymore.”

“Let’s hope we’ll only need the radio once,” Poe said dryly.

“Yeah,” Rey whispered.

As the car rocked side-to-side when the boys began to pile out, she stared out the window. Across the parking lot, the group of misfit punks were leaning against Ben’s old Beetle volkswagen, the yellow paint faded to an even uglier yellow chipped off in large patches, and covered in decals and permanent marker doodles. Under the newest decal on the passenger side door, a massive Scorpions logo, she knew



the exact shape and weight of the doodle it hid. She remembered the asphalt under her jeans, laughing as Ben rolled his eyes, Finn's shoulder pressing against hers and shaking with his chuckles. It was the first doodle on there, before the engine had even been able to run or he'd gotten his permit. When, for a little while, there had been a shared dream to drive West, or East, or anywhere but here...

The chair folded forward and Rey crawled out without looking back to that shitty old bug again. It had been a long time since she thought about those days, and it wasn't like they lasted very long anyway.

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The door creaked open, keys jangling and almost falling when he yanked them out of the lock, making him grunt and grip the paper bags in his arms tighter when they began to slip. It was still a little cold inside, but, thankfully, no more fridge messes caught his eye when he made his way into the kitchen. There wasn't any pile of blankets on the couch, either. Before he could worry, though, there was a curious grunt-y kinda grumble, and Din looked down the hall to see the Kid poking around the corner of the bedroom door. He was about ten times bigger and broader than he should be, with every blanket possible wrapped around him and only his big, bright, brown eyes gleaming from the cotton-y depths. Tiny brown fingers dug out from the cocoon to wave a timid hello.

Behind him was a pile of clothes that Din *knew* had been hanging in his closet. He must've given up the couch for a smaller and safer (in his mind) hiding place.

"Yeah, Kid, just me," Din said, sighing a little, but mostly smiling. The morning had been rough (understatement), and it was only going to get rougher, but at least the Kid was still here. Still hidden.

He turned back to the groceries, leaving a few things out, as tiny feet padded swiftly down the hall. Ten little fingers gripped the edge of the counter and, with another grunt, the Kid peered at the small pile of items and cooed. Wobbling on tiptoes, he grasped the counter

tightly in one hand and reached out with the other, limb and fingers trembling with the long stretch.

Din pushed the yellow and green box sitting on a pad of blank white-ish paper closer. Triumphant, the Kid snatched the box and paper pad, and flopped to his butt right there on the kitchen floor, the blankets tucked around his bony knees and shoulders and over his shaved head. The crayons were opened and then poured into the bowl of his lap. Babbling and cooing, the Kid carefully picked up each crayon, lifted it towards Din, then put it back down with a few unintelligible mutters.

“Don’t draw on the walls or eat those,” he warned. The Kid giggled. No, that was a *cackle*. Din ignored the twitch of his mouth.

The Eggos he had bought were popped in the toaster, and the Kid startled in place and stared, eyes slowly narrowing. When they popped back up, golden-browned and the smell of something-like-waffle filling the kitchen, the Kid grinned, nose twitching, and lifted a hand to point at the Eggos with a neon green crayon. Din smiled to himself and began to slather the first Eggo with butter, the next two he covered in Skippy peanut butter. The Kid was too damn skinny, and kids liked peanut butter, right? Just in case, the next one got butter again. He poured a glass full to the brim with milk and carried the plate, glass, and a bottle of syrup to the table, carefully stepping over a stray foot in two layers of Din’s socks and the edges of his own blankets. When he came back, the Kid was curled over his lap, crayons flying over paper.

Black. Purple. Red. A *lot* of red.

And he was whimpering, muttering and whimpering.

“Kid,” Din whispered.

The crayons continued to fly, the tip of the black crayon worn flat to the paper wrapper already. The Kid’s knuckles were almost white, he was clutching that crayon so tightly in his fist.

Din crouched, balancing on the balls of his feet, and touched the trembling lump where the Kid’s shoulder was under the blanket.

The Kid didn't even flinch, the flat nub of the crayon rubbing on the paper *harder*, the wrapper scratching against the paper. Din gently put his hand over the Kid's, finally stopping that frantic coloring. The hand jerked under Din's palm and the crayon fell to the pad and rolled down into the blankets. Wet, too-wide, too-dark eyes looked up into Din's.

"Your Eggos are gettin' cold," Din said quietly, gently tousling the blankets covering the Kid's head. He sniffled once, then nodded like a loose bobble-head before getting to his feet.

Crayons scattered in every direction.

Din sighed and watched the Kid scurry towards the table, blankets swishing and wagging like heavy, flat tails.

It took a while to unwrap the Kid and put the blankets safely *far* away from the syrup, and then teach the Kid how to use the syrup bottle. He completely ignored the fork, of course, and dug into his meal with contented little grunts, sniffing his drippy nose and licking his syrup-and-butter smeared face like a puppy. Din settled next to him, cutting an apple with his pocket knife and scanning the newspaper he'd grabbed from his mailbox.

The missing person's ad on the Tico girl was already out, and pretty detailed. Not surprising with Solo and Organa putting the right pressure on the editor. He dropped an apple slice on the Kid's plate. He cut another and ate it right off the blade himself, absently realizing he was hungry. The Kid scarfed the apple down, cooed in pleasure at the sweet treat, then grabbed the next Skippy-covered Eggo. His first bite of the peanut butter had the Kid stopping dead, staring at Din with wide, baffled eyes. Din raised an eyebrow and ate another slice of apple without a word. Scowling, the Kid shoved the entire Eggo into his mouth, choked, then chewed viciously. Din wasn't actually sure if it was the peanut butter the Kid didn't like, or the *surprise* of it.

He was definitely *not* chuckling as he set the paper down and went back into the kitchen to clean up the crayons. *And* get a wet paper towel to mop up the Kid's mess (and face). He wrung the paper towel out after wetting it a bit, only to stop and watch as water dripped

from his knuckles to *plip-plip* into his sink.

When he'd gotten the damn things, Luke had gone on an hour long rant about waste and logging industries and sustainability and *you have perfectly good dish cloths, Din*. Although Din had refused to be dragged into an argument about it, pretended to ignore it, he *hadn't* bought a new pack of paper towels since. These had lasted for weeks because he—or a smugly smirking Luke—had used dish cloths instead.

He placed his hands on the edge of the sink and leaned forward, closing his eyes and knocking his forehead to the bottom of the cabinets. He didn't have time to feel guilty about this morning again. He didn't have time to think about it, about how he could have said things differently, should have *not* pushed all those wrong(right) buttons. Should've not made Luke look at him like Din had betrayed him. Hell, he *had* betrayed Luke, throwing his war years and his nightmares in his face like that. Those were private; three years of Luke falling asleep on his couch and Din waking up to Luke's hoarse shouts, bringing him hot water because he didn't have tea, while they both pretended Luke's face wasn't wet with tears. Ignored the names he had whimpered in his sleep while he laughed and threatened to stock Din's cupboard himself.

Din knocked his head against the cabinet again, a little harder, and felt a tiny bit more like shit. He didn't even have time to be *home*, feeding a stray kid and cleaning up crayons, and he definitely didn't have time to be thinking about Luke, a grown ass man who would forgive Din or not.

Bodhi was dead. Kuiil was dead. A girl was *missing*. Dispatch had been flooded with calls all night full of well-intentioned misdirections and panicking parents and seniors. It was a matter of time before the *FBI* forced their way in and took over the entire investigation, and who knew how much of this shit show would be considered under a single umbrella. If he wanted to avoid that, he'd have to get more officers in to keep from overworking the Hawkins' deputies. Which meant calling around the county to get them.

More *unknown variables* in *his* town while he hid a secret runaway child in his own damn home. His home that was freezing cold

because he still didn't have enough time to board up his windows. And his best friend was pissed at him and that should *not* be on his scale of awful right now. But it was. It really fucking was.

There was a chirp and grunt, and Din opened his eyes to see the Kid staring over at him. Syrup dripped from his fist where he held a soaked Eggo, and his bottom lip was trembling, eyes darting from Din, to the windows, to the doors, to Din, breath panting sharply.

"Sh—Sorry, no, everything's fine. Just. Tired." Din forced a small smile and came around the kitchen counter. He settled back in his chair, setting the wet napkin to the side, and scooped his chair closer. He rubbed a hand over the Kid's head, from the crown down to his nape. "It's fine, Kid."

Those too-big eyes blinked slowly, but his breathing evened out. A timid smile slowly formed to match Din's. He shoved the last bite in his mouth and ate it loudly, mouth wide and smacking with each bite. Din grimaced and shook his head, huffing in amusement. The moment the Eggo was swallowed, Din wiped at the Kid's face and hands, quickly wiping down the table with a clean corner before picking up all the trash and ignoring Luke's voice in his head berating him for *paper waste and deforestation, Din!*

When he got back to the table, the Kid was clutching the newspaper in his fist. He was staring at Rose Tico's picture, pupils tiny pinpricks and his bony shoulders pulled tight under his ears.

"Do you recognize this girl?" Din asked, sitting next to him quickly and pulling the newspaper closer. The Kid flinched, but didn't completely pull away, his eyes glued to the grainy photo. "Her name is Rose. Rose Tico. Did you see her?"

The Kid nodded, almost robotically, his chin tipping up down, up down, as if he had to think about each motion individually.

"Where did you see her?" Din paused, then grabbed the discarded drawing pad, turned it to a fresh page, and pulled a pencil stub out of his breast pocket. The crayons were still sitting by the sink. Too far away when any moment the Kid could clam up, or worse. "Can you write it? Or draw it? Where you saw her?"

Ignoring the pencil completely, the Kid turned back a page on his pad. Back to that first picture. The one that was almost completely black, in the middle a strange hunched figure of purple with big purple flower petals where a head should be. And over it all, over the flower-head, the weirdly body-like stem, the black background, were smears of red crayon. Scribbled and wild.

The Kid put his finger on the flower.

“Is that... Rose?”

The Kid inhaled sharply, shook his head, those big ears all but flapping against the sides of his head, and, with a jaggedly bitten down fingernail, scratched a line through the black crayon and off the page.

Din stared, at the picture, at the weird flower that made Din’s skin crawl the longer he looked at it, at all the red and black. Glanced at where the Kid was desperately tapping the table, grunting and whining. Din scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

“Kid, I really don’t get it,” Din finally admitted.

The Kid frowned. And even though he looked pale under his naturally dark skin, and even though he was shaking harder than a leaf in a storm, he repeated the motions. Tapping the purple... thing..., grunting, drawing a line over black and red to the edge of the pad, and finally tapping insistently on the table. Again. Again. Jumbled up consonants and vowels, sounds made without any notion of how to use them, pouring from his mouth between whines and grunts.

“Hey, hey, calm down,” Din said quickly, grabbing the Kid’s hands. They were icy cold, and Din remembered suddenly that his kitchen window was all plastic tarp. He chafed those icy cold fingers between his hands as the Kid wheezed, chest heaving and body still shaking. “It’s okay, Kid. We’ll find her. We’ll figure it out. You go get in those blankets, draw something nice. I’ll handle it.”

The Kid glanced to the drawing, to Din, then to Rose. And stared, breaths whistling past his teeth.

Din reached over and flipped the newspaper over and set his hand down on it. With a sad little whine, the Kid drooped like a puppet without strings.

“I mean it, Kid. Go get in the blankets.”

The Kid slipped from the chair and shuffled towards his blankets. As he struggled to re-wrap himself, Din tore that page out of the pad and tucked the picture in his back pocket. It didn't take long to set the Kid up in the living room with his new crayons and drawing pad.

“If you've got a name, try and write it out for me,” Din said, patting the Kid's blanket-covered head again before turning the TV on. The Kid flinched so hard he smacked against the sofa, eyes wide at the white-fuzz TV screen. Din slapped the top a few times and turned the knob. It was secondhand about four times removed, but the picture was fine after a few minutes. Some show trying to sell kitchen supplies, so Din clicked through until a baseball game was playing. The same one he and Luke were supposed to watch last night.

Din got to his feet quickly and cleared his throat. “I gotta... the windows.” He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. The Kid tore his wide eyes away from the TV, blinking heavily a few times before he nodded woodenly.

He frowned at the Kid for a minute, then frowned over at the TV, but the Kid was already opening his crayon box. With a shrug, Din left the room and snatched up his coat. He had maybe thirty minutes before his house line would be ringing off the hook, the department demanding his return. It wasn't often he took even 15 minutes for a lunch break, and he was getting close to being late for his actual shift. No one was going to understand why *now* of all times he would be late, and he didn't want any questions following him home.

Out in his (not-fenced-in) backyard, he had a small shed. Like everyone in bumfuck Indiana, he had a hunting rifle (or two... or more) and several of his own tools. He'd always been good with his hands, and when his town wasn't plunged into chaos (which was *always*, this was one of the most boring towns in America... until recently), Din actually enjoyed yard work. Or at least mowing the lawn so he could grill in the summer. Or so he could take naps in his

shitty plastic and rusted metal lawn chairs when it was sunny out and Dune inevitably took over and bitched with Solo about how no one could grill properly. Thankfully that meant he now had everything he needed for a shitty window-patch job until he could get an actual professional out to replace the windows.

Whenever that could be with the Kid shuffling around.

The patch job was just sticking a few thin plywood boards over the empty panes (any remaining shards of glass he'd already cleaned up the night before and tossed in the outdoor bin), and using an old staple gun to stick the boards in place. It looked pretty terrible, honestly, but he had left the tarp up on the inside for an extra layer of insulation, so it wasn't like the inside looked any better.

After less than twenty minutes—thanks to whoever invented staple guns—Din trudged back inside through the kitchen door. He shook the door a bit, made sure nothing was loose or rattling, and hurried to make up some sandwiches and dig out the kid-friendly snacks he had bought. It was while he juggled the boxes and plate and the central heating thermostat on the way out of the kitchen that the noise finally made it through. He let the cover on the thermostat drop back in place and edged silently around the corner to peer into the living room.

The drawing pad and crayons were left spread out higgly-piggly over the coffee table and the blankets in an untidy pile on the floor. The TV had somehow been turned from the game he had left it on to a channel of only white-fuzz. He thought, maybe, it had happened on its own, until he realized what he was looking at. The Kid had found an old pair of wool longjohns that Din hadn't worn in ages, if ever. He was pretty sure he had shoved those things to the back of his bureau the moment he had opened his foster-mother's Christmas gift that year. But there they were, wrapped a few times around the Kid's head and tied in a messy but tight knot at the back like a blindfold.

The Kid was kneeling in front of the TV, so close that his snub-nose was almost touching the screen, and his hands were lying palm-up and bonelessly lax on his thighs. Slowly, Din set everything in his arms down on the coffee table, then made his way over to the TV. The Kid didn't so much as change his *breathing*, as if nothing existed



outside the white noise of the TV and whatever he could see behind the darkness of the blindfold. As Din leaned closer, balancing on one knee and the ball of the other foot, he could just barely make out the Kid's mouth moving, whispers of gibberish spilling past his lips.

"Kid?" Din rasped hoarsely.

Without so much as tilting his head, the Kid's hands rose and began to move. For a single, rather shameful moment, goosebumps crept down Din's spine. Then, in the next, he realized those weren't random and involuntary motions. That was *language*. Calling himself a moron in all three languages Din *did* know, he narrowed his gaze on the Kid's hands. It became clear pretty quickly that he was repeating the same four motions, and his vocalizations were getting louder, more urgent, but still not quite words. When Din was pretty sure he could remember the movements, he reached out to touch the Kid's shoulder.

"Hey, Kid," Din said quietly.

That's when he saw the thin trickle of blood sliding down towards the Kid's top lip. The boy kept repeating the signs, his mouth moving, the sounds whisper-thin. The shaking of his body was so wild, Din's fingers automatically clamped down harder to keep his hold.

"Time to stop *now*," Din ordered, pulling the Kid around and yanking the blindfold off not quite roughly.

The Kid blinked, pupils so wide the brown of his irises was completely enveloped in black. Tears streamed down his cheeks, lashes clumping, and he waved his hands in the air, the movements and words, whatever they were, more urgent, more wild, stopping only to jab at the TV and repeating the same guttural sounds. The blood slipped faster and thicker from his nose.

"No." It was firm, almost a tangible thing between them, and his hands gently held the Kid's face so their eyes would meet. The Kid whimpered, eyes darting to the TV and back. "You're hurt, Kid."

Blink. He just *blinked*. Din dropped his hands with a rough sigh and small smile. Luckily, he'd grabbed a few more papers towels to go

with the snacks and sandwiches. He tore off a large square and, moving slow so as to not startle the baffled child, he dabbed under the Kid's nose and his upper lip.

There was a small grumbly sound, and those big brown eyes stared at him.

"Listen up, 'cuz this is important," Din said sternly, his movements gentle. The Kid blinked slowly. "You're just a kid. A little one, pretty scrawny, actually." He smirked a little at the Kid's offended squawk. "And me? I'm the adult. The *sheriff*. I told ya last night, remember? It's my job to take care of you."

The Kid nodded, his bottom lip wobbling.

"If something's hurting you, or scaring you, you tell *me*. Whatever happened to you, whatever you saw with—" He stopped himself from saying Kuuil. There was a good chance the Kid hadn't known his name, besides Din didn't want to remind him if he didn't have to. He swiftly changed it, "...with that girl, Rose, *I'm gonna take care of it. Me and my officers. You're not gonna hurt yourself 'cuz you think it's gonna help me. There's no need for you to do that, not anymore.*"

The Kid sniffled hard, fat, glistening tears building up and falling down his thin face. He was shaking his head, again and again, pointing at the TV, grunting and sobbing. Shoving the bloody paper in his pocket, Din hesitantly placed his hand on the Kid's head, stroking over the short buzzed hair, and gripped the back of his neck.

"It's gonna be okay. Whatever you think you gotta do, you *don't*. You just gotta be safe. Can you do that for me, Kid? Can you stay here and be safe?"

After too long a moment of shuddering sobs, the Kid nodded and rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. Din grabbed another square of paper towel, wiped at his sopping wet face, and held it to his nose.

"Blow."

With a confused scowl, the Kid blew through pursed lips. It took too

much will power not to laugh at that, but Din controlled himself. He demonstrated it quickly, smile pulling at the side of his mouth as comprehension lit up brown eyes and the Kid copied him.

“I have to get to work. There’s food here for you, and if you want something to drink, there’s some cups of juice already poured in the fridge. I’ll make sure to make you something hot for dinner, but... yeah, this is all I got,” Din said awkwardly.

The Kid stared at the piles of turkey sandwiches, three different kinds of crackers, a bottle of Cheese Whiz, a bowl of cut grapes and already peeled oranges, and a half dozen foil-wrapped Ding Dongs, one of which Din grabbed now. If there was ever a time for chocolate...

He split the Ding Dong in half and slumped to the ground next to the Kid when he handed it over. He flicked the TV off with a frown, and tapped his cake to the Kid’s, like a toast. The Kid looked up from squinting at the treat in his hand. Din pointedly took a big bite. The Kid sniffed it first before following suit.

Abruptly, he shoved the rest in his mouth so quick a few fingers got nibbled in the process. His puffy red eyes slipped closed and he hummed, smacking his lips and showing off the smears of chocolate and creme and cake over his teeth, tongue, and mouth. Din smirked and gave the Kid the rest of his Ding Dong before rubbing his head one more time. The Kid grunted eagerly and shoved it in his mouth.

“All those sandwiches better be eaten before all the cake is,” Din ordered, pointing at each with a finger. The Kid chewed loudly in response, still humming happily. “And no more... no more TV. None of that.”

The Kid glanced at the TV, frowned and sucked on his fingers soundlessly. Din shook his head, slapped his knees, and got to his feet. When he finished throwing away the messy napkins and getting his hat and keys (his gun he’d left in his Blazer’s glove box), he turned to see the Kid already had another cake in his mouth and big, guilty eyes staring up at him. Rolling his eyes heavenward, Din sighed and left to the sounds of the Kid’s quiet cackles.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

The ableist language will be a re-occurring thing, with words like "nutty/nuts", "crazy", and similar being used to describe Luke's state of mind in a less than pleasant way. Just, be aware, okay? There's a reason for it and why it's so prevalent, so it's not exactly going away any time soon, but I know someone people are really uncomfortable with that.

Part II is with the beta already! Should be up very very soon if I stop being kind and bug him about it! LOL (and now you know why it's been split into two, goshdang this was long). Check out the story tag, cuz I'm updating them a bit! I hope it was worth the wait for the people reading this one. I'm SO SORRY about that! I really didn't mean to take so long!!

## 4. Tuesday Pt II

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Ben, this isn’t the time to question every little thing. You gotta believe us or not, man,” Finn said softly, both his hands now on Rey’s shoulders.

She shuddered, eyes slipping closed as she inhaled once sharply. Visibly collecting herself and hating every moment that her weakness showed in front of Ben— the jerk that bullied them for years, that bailed on them just when they’d begun to believe in him. And they now needed him. She would rather be anywhere else, asking anyone else, but he was their best chance. Her eyes opened and she met Ben’s gaze, his eyes darting from Finn to Rey from under his lank, black, and too-long bangs. Rey felt her chin tremble until she gritted her teeth, hard enough they squeaked.

“Ben, please, you’re our only hope,” she whispered.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Just a note: you may notice a character from the sequels not written in the best of light. Welp, I really dislike the sequels, so that's probably why, also it was amusing to me. Ben will be getting a good character arc, but I really dislike the whole First Order everything so meh. (However, the video games and TCW I absolutely adore and a few characters named here are from Fallen Order \*wink\*)

Music suggestions: Elegia by New Order (Stranger Things S1 OST), Come Dancing by The Kinks, Human by Rag'N'Bone Man, Renegade by Styx

School, all nearly-eight hours of it, had been *hell*. Rey had spent every class watching the clock hands twitch twitch *twitch* in tiny increments

across the face. She'd almost forced the boys to give up lunch and get Ben to help them right then, but Ben had been suspiciously missing. (Finn had pointed out that half the time Ben wasn't in the cafeteria for lunch, but Rey was still peeved. She wasted almost the entire period trying to find him, and only managed to choke down a cold fish sandwich and pocket-warmed fruit cup in English class when Finn slipped it into her desk after lunch.) She lounged now against her locker, hands shoved in her second-favorite jacket, a facade of calm patience. Unlike her favorite leather bomber, this jacket's every hem was tattered, the material made of ugly tan canvas, and the elbows worn almost to holes; its only redeeming features were the huge pockets and how well it kept out the wind, though it wasn't very warm on the whole.

The sound of sneakers squeaking on tile had her head jerking up for the 100<sup>th</sup> time in the past ten seconds. This time it *was* Finn barreling around the corner. He was a bit breathless, but he flopped onto the bank of lockers and gasped his breath back quickly.

"Poe's talking to Coach. He'll get me excused and meet us after practice at the parking lot. We just gotta make sure we walk 'round the front and far from the field so the team can't see me," Finn explained.

"What?" Rey asked with a scowl.

"I could get kicked off the team if they find out I'm playing hooky just to break into the AV Room. Poe's tellin' 'em I'm taking you straight home because our parents are cracking down on us after... yanno, Rose." He shrugged awkwardly, mouth pinching at the corners.

Rey wanted to scream. *Why* did these stupid boys care so much about sports?! But she also knew that Finn's only chance into a good university would be a sports' scholarship. He had been a dedicated jock for the past two years for the *chance* at it. And Rose wasn't—They *would* find her, so Rey bit her tongue and nodded.

"All right." She sighed a moment later. Thinking of Finn's descent into jockdom reminded her of whom they were about to go see. "It's gonna be a lot harder being nice to *Ben freakin' Solo* without Poe

around.”

“You can say that again. C’mon, I got your back, warrior-girl.”

“Shut up,” Rey muttered, knocking her shoulder against his and trying not to smile.

Fisto’s classroom wasn’t far from Rey’s locker—although, honestly, nothing was far from anything at Hawkins High. It wasn’t exactly a huge place, even if most teens in the entire county surrounding Hawkins attended. For a heart stopping minute, Rey thought they had missed Ben again. The narrow window set in the door was dark, and the classroom was empty when they peeked in. However, at the far side of the class, there was another door where light *was* spilling out the slightly ajar opening. The doorknob under her hand opened easily, as well, and Rey led Finn in with relief surging up her throat.

There was a quiet murmur of voices and the hissing crackle of radio static. A hesitant, awkward, and familiar chuckle had Rey biting on her lip, remembering that afternoon by the Beetle. Then, she was pushing open the door to the small closet that ended up being the AV room—at least, she assumed it must be with the president of the AV Club sitting in front of a huge radio-looking thing, wearing a bright blue headset and holding a weird-looking microphone that could stand on its own on the desk. Ben all but jumped to his feet when he saw Rey and Finn at the door, the wire of the headphones yanking him back before he could step forward, and his chair fell with a clatter. Next to him, his rude redheaded friend spun around on his stool and sneered at them.

“Look, it’s the soccer team’s mascot and his trash.”

Rey flipped the boy the bird. “Shut up,” she said without an ounce of the humor she’d had when she said it to Finn earlier. She crossed her arms over her chest and met Ben’s eyes. “Get rid of your skinhead friend.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” Ben said hotly.

“I’m gone. Better that than hanging out with *them*,” Armie Hux muttered, already getting out of his seat. He grabbed his bag and

headed for the door on the other side of the small room. Made sense there would be a door other than the one in the classroom, but Rey definitely hadn't seen it until just then. He shoved against it with his shoulder, gone in the next second.

"Great, what do you want?" Ben asked, taking off his headphones and setting them carefully, almost reverently, on the desk.

"What do you *think*, Solo?" Rey asked, rolling her eyes. "Why else would I be punishing myself talking to you for the second time this week?"

"Maybe you finally got over yourself and felt like apologizing," Ben snapped.

"For what? I did your face a favor if that's what you're talking about a *year* later," Rey snarled.

Finn quickly stepped between them, one hand on Rey's shoulder, the other held up in front of Ben's chest, but not touching. "Okay, *okay*, get it together. We're here about Rose, obviously. So both of you stop being assholes for two seconds and focus. *Both of you*," Finn ordered pointedly, his eyes on Rey's.

She huffed, but hearing Rose's name said out loud had her backing down. Guilt bubbled in her stomach and her arms fell, crossing around her belly as she leaned against the desk. Ben twitched, eyes darting to the equipment she couldn't even begin to label, but looked back at them, still scowling.

"I don't see how I'm supposed to help, but I'll do what I can. For Rose."

Rey's mouth thinned and she glared at the wall across the room. Rose swore up and down that she and Ben weren't *like that*. But did *Ben* know that? What would his stupid skinhead friends think about him and Rose, the Vietnamese girl? Maybe that was the only reason why they weren't dating.

"We need to use the radio. The one Rose said Mr. Fisto just got in?" Finn said cautiously. He didn't even try to say the name of it, not



wanting to give Ben any ammunition. There had been enough derisive comments about Finn's intelligence for the past year.

Luckily, Ben was too busy frowning over at the bulky thing next to him to notice Rey stepping closer to Finn to bump their shoulders together.

"What's the Heathkit got to do with Rose?" he finally demanded.

"Heathkit," Finn whispered under his breath.

Swinging her backpack around, Rey yanked out her walkietalkie, the twin, or well, triplet, to Rose's (and Finn's).

"We think Rose has hers. Before it got taped off, me 'n Finn 'n Poe were in Rose's house. I didn't see hers anywhere. I think she had it with her, she was supposed to call in when she made it home that night and didn't, so she could've had it when... when it happened..." She trailed off, swallowing around the sudden rock in her throat.

"Okay? So? She has to be using it at the exact time I'm trying to find the channel, you realize that, right? That's *if* she has it, and *if* it still has battery, and *if* whoever has her let her keep it. You're *nuts*," Ben said bluntly, not even moving towards the radio.

"Just try it! You said you're her friend, so act like it!" Rey demanded.

Ben scowled. "Why don't you tell the police?"

"*You* barely believe me, why would they? Plus, you realize people are ending up dead, right? They probably think she... *she* is, too, or as good as. They're not gonna stop and listen to me say I think- *I know* she's still alive because I heard her *breathing* on a phone call and that she's hiding from something!" Rey said, hands in tight fists at her sides and chest heaving.

"A phone call?" Ben repeated.

"Ben, this isn't the time to question every little thing. You gotta believe us or not, man," Finn said softly, both his hands now on Rey's shoulders.

She shuddered, eyes slipping closed as she inhaled once sharply. Visibly collecting herself and hating every moment that her weakness showed in front of *Ben*—the jerk that bullied them for years, that bailed on them just when they’d begun to believe in him. And they now needed him. She would rather be anywhere else, asking anyone else, but he was their best chance. Her eyes opened and she met Ben’s gaze, his eyes darting from Finn to Rey from under his lank, black, and too-long bangs. Rey felt her chin tremble until she gritted her teeth, hard enough they squeaked.

“Ben, *please*, you’re our only hope,” she whispered. Finn’s hands squeezed reflexively at the quiet pleading. Ben reared back, eyes wider.

The older teen looked away and licked his lips before biting them briefly. Everything about him was so *awkward*, and hesitant, but when he looked back he looked scarily like his mother; dark gaze heavy and intense, jaw tight, mouth a firm line. Every inch a councilwoman’s son and Mayor’s grandkid.

“Yeah. I believe you.”

Rey sighed in relief and slumped back against Finn’s grip.

While Ben sat back down at the table, picking up his headphones and fiddling with switches, that same determined focus lighting his eyes and ticking at his jaw, Finn and Rey slipped into seats and clasped hands. Rey didn’t even realize she was still clutching the walkietalkie in her other hand until Finn reached out and gently pried it from her grasp. Her fingers tingled as blood returned swiftly.

“Okay, it’s all set. Do you know what frequency I should be trying on?” Ben asked tonelessly. For once it wasn’t a kind of toneless indifference that immediately set Rey’s teeth on edge. He seemed too focused to care about inflection, and Rey could appreciate that. Especially in this instance. She exchanged a baffled look with Finn, which Ben caught when he looked up. He sighed and unplugged the headphones, letting the small closet fill with whitenoise. “All right then. It’ll take a while, but I guess we’ll just surf.”

“Surf?”

"Listen carefully. If you hear something that sounds like Rose, say something immediately so I can figure out the exact channel," Ben said, fingers on a knob. Rey nodded, her hand wrapping tighter around Finn's.

"Right."

For long, never-ending minutes, hours, *days*, the only noise in the tiny closet of a room was from the radio. The continuous buzzing and fuzzing and *sssshing*, the occasional burst of words, garbled and indistinct, or *too* distinct, and none of it Rose. Every time a voice came through, Finn's hand tightened around hers, and Rey would lean forward, but it was never right. It was getting darker in the hallway outside the door Armie had left through, the afternoon slowly but surely becoming evening. Poe would come looking for them at any minute as soccer practice ended. There was a hum of a floor waxer as the janitor began his after-school duties.

But still no Rose.

Ben checked his watch a long long time later, when Rey's eyes were burning from staring and her hand had gone numb from Finn's constant squeezing.

"I have to get home eventually. I have to help my dad with the twins," he muttered, his voice breaking through her concentration.

"Yeah, and Mom will freak if we're late getting home," Finn agreed, but it was soft and pained.

"We can't just give up after, like, an *hour*. Not yet," Rey begged. "She's *out* there, she's waiting for us. Don't turn it off."

"Rey," Ben started. Rey stumbled forward off her stool and grabbed Ben's arm, nails all but digging into his bicep through the thick knit of his wool sweater. Their eyes met, and they hadn't been this close to each other since the day she'd punched him.

"Just until Poe shows up. We'll find her, *please*."

As awkwardly as ever, Ben tensed all over, pale face going red in odd patches—high on his cheeks, his nose, his ears, down his neck—but

he nodded, swallowing so loud Rey could hear the *clunk* of it. When he reached out again, eyes on the dial as he oh-so-slowly turned the knob, Rey held on and *stared*. Her lips were moving, but she didn't feel it, didn't hear the soft murmurs spilling from her mouth; *please* and *Rose* and *come on come on*.

"... *everybody come...*"

"Stop!" Rey hissed, shaking Ben's arm. "Go back, go back!"

"I didn't hear anything," Ben said with a frown.

"Rey, what was it?" Finn tucked up close to her other side, all three teens squishing themselves shoulder to shoulder, almost cheek to cheek, as Ben fiddled in tiny increment movements.

"It's *her*, it was our song, I know I heard it," Rey said fiercely.

"Your song? Wait, the one you spent that whole Saturday trying to catch on the radio to record?" Finn asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, yes, The Kinks song. Shh *sshh*," she said, smacking at his leg.

"... *doot doot doodadoodadoo...*"

Rey's eyes burned and she pressed her knuckles to her mouth. Rose always did that after the chorus, *dooting* the melody as they danced or jumped on the bed.

"... *come dancing, just like at the palais on a Saturday, and all her friends will come dancing, where the big bands used to play,*" Rose's whispering, thready voice had the boys on each side of her gasping. Rey grabbed the microphone, fast as a snake, fingers shaking.

"Rose! Rose, it's me, Rey. Do you hear me?" she said, grinning and eyes wet.

"...*they put a parking lot on a piece of land...*"

"Rose! Come on, Ro, please, hear me!"

But her voice was getting quieter, radio inference breaking through

the words *supermarket* and *stand* as she continued to sing. Ben was already at the dials and knobs, carefully adjusting this and that, Rose's voice breaking in and out, quieter and louder, broken and clear.

"Rose!" Rey shouted.

The singing stopped. All three held their breath and something hot slid down Rey's top lip, an icy cold shiver running down her spine, curling in her stomach. *Nonononocomeback*—

"Rey?"

It was so *small* and *scared*, but it was Rose. It was *Rose*.

"Rose, oh my God, Rose, it's me, yeah," Rey blurted, half-laughing. She rubbed absently at the hot tickle under her nose.

"Rey... *am I... you... Rey?*"

"Ben, what's going on? Can you fix it?" Finn demanded. His hand was shaking where it was wrapped around her wrist.

"Hold on," Ben forced past clenched teeth.

"*I... home... dark...*"

"Rose, wait, where are you? Say where you *are*," Rey pleaded, eyes on the dial moving between tick marks and numbers in tiny, twitching increments.

"*Home. I'm home.*"

Finn and Rey stared at each other.

"What do you mean you're home?" Finn asked, his hand around Rey's wrist pulling the microphone towards his mouth.

"*It's home, but it's ... .. Paige?*"

"Paige is fine. What do you mean but? It's home but what? You cut out," Rey asked desperately.

*“Wrong. ...ark. Oh G...”*

Silence. Just *ssssh*.

“Rose?”

*“... coming. It’s coming.”*

The terror in Rose’s fuzzy whisper had all three listeners paling, goosebumps rising.

*“... found me...”*

“Go, go now! We’ll come for you, I promise, just get to...” Rey’s mind blanked. Where could Rose hide? Where could she run to? Finn grabbed the mic.

“Get to Jakku’s Junkyard, Rose. Get to the junkyard!” Finn rushed to say, practically panting between the words.

*Sssshhhh*. There was a crackle, a pop, and then sparks flew from behind the Heathkit, from the speaker in front of Finn’s mouth. He dropped it with a jerk back, and flames burst out of the back of the radio.

“Fuck!” Ben shouted, scrambling out of his chair and grabbing the fire extinguisher. It was luckily a small fire, and it was out in a moment, Ben falling back into his chair with the extinguisher clattering to the ground. He stared at the foamy, smelly mess left in front of him, mouth sagging open. Finn and Rey very astutely kept their mouths shut. “Fuck.”

A dark shape passed the hall door and they all scrambled away, Finn letting out a shout, flailing and grabbing at the counter to stay upright. Rey yanked the microphone so hard the wire snapped and she held it up, stepping forward and pushing Ben behind her next to Finn as the door swung open.

Poe walked in and immediately backtracked out with flail and shout of his own, the door smacking into his shoulder as it tried to swing shut.

“What the hell?” he blurted, hands up high and dufflebag swinging from his elbow.

“Poe!” Finn exclaimed, edging past Rey and grabbing his arms.

Rey stared down at the broken microphone, and glanced back at Ben. She grinned lopsidedly, lips twitching around bared teeth.

“Um. Oops?”

He glowered, pale face splotchy red again and shoulders high around his ears.

“*Really?*”

“I would say I’d pay for it... but, um... I think it’s kinda... beyond me.” They both stared at the already burnt up machinery.

Ben rolled his eyes, snatched the microphone from her hand, and slammed it on the desk. “Let’s go.”

“Go? Go where?” Poe asked, looking around Finn.

“Jakku. We’re going, and we gotta go now,” Finn answered.

He shoved the door wide open and tugged Poe behind him. Rey was already on their heels, scowling over at Ben when he caught up, his military green bag, the faded black remainder of *Sk..lker* stamped on its side, bouncing on his back.

“You’re not coming, too?”

“Of course I’m coming,” Ben grumbled. Ahead of them Finn was still explaining what happened to Poe, whose eyebrows were so high they were hidden behind his wet, slowly re-curling bangs. “You said *something*. And she... she said *it*.”

Rey nodded once.

“Not who. Not he or she.”

“So?” She tried to shrug carelessly, but it was more like a full body

twitch.

“So *whatever* it is, it’s a hell of a lot more complicated than a friggin’ kidnapping. Especially if she thinks she’s home. It’s just... this is all fucking *nuts*, and maybe you guys need someone with experience in that,” Ben said, shrugging his shoulder.

“You have experience with weird kidnappings and... *whatevers*?” Rey said with a snort.

“No, I have experience with fucking crazy. You’ve met my dad and my uncle, right? They kinda... *excel* at that.” Rey snorted. “And I’ve got a crowbar in my trunk,” he added as Poe shoved the exit open and they piled outside.

“Fine. Don’t forget the crowbar,” Rey said, pointing at him. Ben nodded seriously.

Poe ran a hand through his hair. “Right, so... we’re not even gonna bother going home first, are we? You realize my parents will flip?”

“*Who cares*?” Finn, Ben, and Rey all demanded. Poe raised his hands in surrender yet again.

“Right, of course, who cares there’s been a bunch of murders and missing people and my parents will take my car away if they think I’m getting into trouble, stupid question,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

Rey huffed and went for his car. Ben didn’t bother saying a word, breaking away to head towards his own shitty yellow bug across the lot. Finn clapped Poe’s shoulder and gave him a small smile.

“Don’t worry. I’ll stick with you if you lose those cool points without your Sunbird.”

“Well, as long as I’ve got you,” Poe said, sighing and shaking his head. Finn ducked his head and chuckled when Poe gripped the back of his neck lightly. Rey’s irritated scowl and tapping foot had Poe dropping his hand and hurrying around to unlock the doors.

“C’mon, Rey, he’s just being realistic. He didn’t *hear* her, either,” Finn



whispered.

“I’ll forgive him if he speeds the whole way to Jakku,” Rey muttered darkly.

The passenger door creaked open and Poe was grinning from where he was leaning across the seats. “Now that, *that* I can do. Strap in.”

They were peeling out of the lot in seconds, rubber all but burning, and the puttering and clunking Beetle right on their fender.

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Golden and rosy light poured through the window in thin streaks, broken by bars of shadows made by the blinds. Distantly, Din knew he should turn on the overhead light, but his desk lamp was on, the brass bell of a shade funneling the bright light right onto his hands and the papers beneath them. He knew he was good at his job, or at the very least competent, and one of the reasons why was his ability to focus completely on a singular objective. To get each duty and case finished with as few loose ends and as little wasted time as possible. For a big city, it meant he’d made sergeant detective relatively young. For the tiny scrap of Hawkins, Indiana, it had made him sheriff, elected with relative ease. (Honestly, he hadn’t even run his own campaign. He was pretty sure Dune and the previous Sheriff had done it for him.)

But more than two decades of experience on the force in some capacity didn’t stop his concentration now from breaking every five seconds, eyes caught on the clock for long minutes until he shook himself back into the present. When he lived with Omera and Winta, he would clock out on time, took less and less overtime hours, sometimes left early if it were his turn to pick Winta up from daycare, and later primary school. He had loved the few hours of driving across town with Winta, singing rock songs they pretended Omera didn’t know they sang, a silly secret for the two of them. The dinners all three of them would cook together, laughing over the silly tricks Omera looked up to keep from crying over onions or chasing a

happily shrieking Winta around the kitchen with messes on their hands. Before he had started ‘accidentally’ falling asleep on the couch and started working on the night shift with a piss-poor excuse of his promotion being the reason why.

Now there was a kid at *his* home, *alone*, and every instinct in him screamed to get going. To make sure he was warm and fed and safe. Omera used to say he had never shaken off growing up as one the oldest in a foster home, never gave up the responsibility he had taken on himself to help his foster mother with all those desperately love-starved children. She was probably right. She always was.

There was a quiet knock and Din jerked upright in his chair. The vaguely familiar redhead, a man less than ten years older than Din, was standing at the doorway, knuckles on the frame. Kestis was a good sergeant, honest, straight-forward, and reliable. But it was off-putting to see him in Hawkins rather than at his usual station the next town over.

“Sheriff, the report from the staties came in,” Kestis started slowly, a frown already pulling his fair brows together, creases lining his forehead. Despite his age, his features were still soft and his emotions easy to read. Din didn’t need to hear it to know what came next. “Nothing came through.”

Din scrubbed a hand over his face with a rough sigh. He couldn’t bring himself to show any other sign of weakness or fatigue, quickly squaring his shoulders and giving the sergeant a jerky nod.

“They said Tico, the older sister, was basically one step ahead of them all day,” Kestis added with a slight smile. “There are posters of the missing kid in every bus station, on a telephone pole every ten feet. They might’ve been exaggerating, but not by much.”

“Did the tech release her house?” he asked. Kestis shook his head.

“There’s a gun missing and some ammo. They wanted to do a thorough check to see if they can find it, but with Deputy Rook still missing, and the parameters of the crime scene, both of the crime scenes, being so large...” Kestis shrugged a shoulder.

“Right. Make sure you and Night get out of here on time. You’re not supposed to run yourself ragged, too.”

Kestis’s teeth flashed in a quick, crooked grin. “Yeah, that would probably defeat the purpose of being the *relief* team.”

Din lifted a hand, in a ‘just so’ motion, and turned back to the reports on his desk. Only for Kestis to approach and drop another thin file on his desk.

He was not going to sigh.

He was *definitely not* going to sigh.

A quick look confirmed it was the Internal Affairs report, signed Suduri and Vizsla. Both of them *known* for being so thorough, it was almost better to be sent off to prison than file the paperwork. Din didn’t have anything personally against IA, they did an important job, but it meant at least another hour of red tape.

He sighed. *Damn it.*

“Good news is they left. It’ll be officially closed by week’s end if you’re lucky,” Kestis said with a wry twist to his mouth. ‘Lucky’ meaning no more dead cop bodies piling up, Din heard the unsaid.

“And Dune?”

“Gone before five. She pretty much bullied the poor department shrink into getting her in A-sap for a meeting, so she’ll probably be back tomorrow.”

Sounded like Dune. Din’s mouth twitched into a sad cousin of a smile, but it was nice to be amused for a brief moment. Another quick look in the file and he saw the forms to sign off on her paid leave for the day, as well as a few other things. He pinched the bridge of his nose and *did not* sigh again.

“I can help with some of that? Two people will get it done faster...” Kestis offered, nodding towards the file.

It said a lot that Din actually hesitated before shaking his head. “I got

it. You've got a drive, and Night is waiting."

"Then, I'll bring in a cup of coffee to get you through it," Kestis offered instead, that awkwardly kind smile back. Din returned it with a much smaller, but just as genuine one.

When the man turned away, the quiet murmurs of his partner rising, Din reopened the folder and began to make his way through it. Half of his mind was already home again, wondering what he could make that was quick, hot, and filling all while being kid-friendly. The Kid would probably eat frogs if they held still long enough, but Din wasn't going to let that happen.

The only sounds in his office were the scritch of his pen and the rustle of papers for a lot longer than it normally took for coffee to brew. He was too absorbed in his work to notice the time much, though. The door finally opening introduced the smell of coffee and... hazelnut? He frowned, but kept his eyes on the forest search reports. Most of the searches had stopped right at the fence surrounding the lab. What he told Luke, as badly as he had, *was* true; getting a warrant would be impossible. But... He peered closer at the few photos his deputies and the volunteers took that happened to catch the lab's parking lot, taking note of the angle and height. A plain white mug with the department logo was set on his desk near his hand and he grunted something that sounded vaguely thankful.

Instead of a polite farewell or the door merely opening and closing again (if it were Detective Night, that would make sense; she was almost more taciturn than himself), the other person sat in the low chair in front of his desk.

Then, proceeded to sip obnoxiously loud at what was probably their own coffee.

Din glanced up, irritated and scowling, only to double-take hard enough his chair creaked and rocked under him.

Leia Organa-Solo sipped at her coffee again, one eyebrow rising and the side of her mouth quirked up, though thinly and not quite reaching her dark eyes. Despite being twins, she looked *nothing* like Luke... but at the same time they looked too much alike. Especially

right now, with that sardonic amusement in every line of her face. It was eerie, those times he'd seen them together and their expressions had been almost exact mirrors. The way they could exchange a look and a whole discussion could be had without a word. They also shared the same boundless energy and refusal to back down against any odds.

She crossed her legs at the knee, set her stolen mug on the top knee, and tapped her short, unpolished nails against the side. He had seen Leia in several social situations (not always because he'd wanted to); stylish and glossy with flawlessly intimidating make up, or wearing torn-up high-waisted shorts and her brother's ironically made tie-dye crop tops, or in her winter pajamas and woolly slippers when Luke had finally forced Din into celebrating Christmas with them last year. She was scariest like this, though. With her make up so subtle it was almost invisible, her shining hair in a complicated knot of braids, and a perfectly tailored pantsuit on her deceptively diminutive frame.

This look meant business. And by the lines drawn deep around her eyes and mouth, she had been at it for hours. It did not bode well for the sheriff she was ready to bowl over. Din sighed and took a deep gulp of his coffee. At least the hazelnut made sense now.

"Your coffee is terrible. Is that really how you waste your budget?"

Din took another drink. Wished fervently he drank whiskey.

"The Mayor's talking curfew."

"*Damn it*," Din groaned, dropping the mug to the desk and his face into his hand. "We're already low on manpower. Who is he expecting to *enforce* that, Leia?"

"Right now it's Councilwoman Organa," she said, sharp and swift. "And not just because I'm on the clock."

"You're a salaried position-"

"Don't be cute, Djarin. I'm *pissed*. My town is literally a clusterfuck of anxiety and terror, and *children* and *murder* are somehow in the same newspaper article, and there's been *nothing* to show the police have

been doing *anything*. And to put a *delicious fucking cherry* on this bullshit sundae, you basically called my brother and best friend a basket-case and chased him out of here. How *dare* you talk to me like I'm going to, what, *commiserate*?" Leia demanded. Every word was bitten out, teeth flashing like a feral cat.

His mouth opened, then closed, and he glanced away. He could feel how his brows pulled together, how low his mouth pulled down. There was nothing to rebut—he *had* fucked up with Luke *and* he had nothing to show for all the work his team had been doing.

"Hm. At least you're not completely idiotic. That is the look of a man full of regret," Leia said after a long pause. He glanced at her as she pursed her lips, looking more like a mother about to scold one of her twins than a councilwoman talking to a sheriff. "Do I need to lock you both in a room to talk out your problems like big boys?"

"No."

She grinned at him. "That sounds like 'yes, please, Leia, I'm too emotionally constipated to say sorry and your brother can be a prideful moron so we need you to fix us' to me."

"That was a lot of words hidden in the *one* I actually said."

"And yet, I'm totally and completely right. As always," she said with a wave of her hand. She took another sip of coffee, her amusement wiped away and replaced with the same tired concern Din had been seeing in every face that day in the department. As well as out in the woods when he checked in with the search parties—and probably spent too long walking with while Dune was locked in her interview. "He's serious about the curfew, Djarin. That's a teenage girl and a little boy unaccounted for within hours of *two* deaths. Mara told me about her medical report. I know Bodhi... Bodhi couldn't have... even if there's no body..." Leia's eyes fluttered closed, her breath shuttering past trembling lips; in the next second the weakness was gone and her dark brown eyes were fixed on his.

"The trace evidence was undeniable," Din agreed dully. He sighed roughly after the realization kicked in. "How you and your husband manage to get my medical examiner to give you so many details... I

don't want to have to fire half my staff."

"Blame Luke for that one," Leia said, one hand rising in weary surrender. "They were high school sweethearts. He Dear John'd her around the time of his deployment, but they've been good friends."

"Dear ... John'd her?" Din repeated, eyebrows rising to his hairline and trying (and failing) to ignore the flash of images in his mind: of petite and fiercely second-generation Irish and every inch the red-headed, freckled ideal Mara Jade and *Luke Golden Boy Skywalker* being sweethearts. It fit too well, and his throat burned. He slapped the folder in front him closed a little too hard, his palm stinging where it lay flat on his desk. "I actually want to get home sometime tonight, Le—Councilwoman Organa."

"Right. I'm not just here about the curfew, though one more dead body and it's going to happen. You should start planning, Din," Leia warned. Din jerked his chin into a brief nod. She tapped at her mug, lips pursing again. "You know Luke he... doesn't get angry much. When he does he blows up hot and fast, but he also cools off fast. Not like me, and not like Han, either." She smiled, and something about the sharp gleam in her eyes and curl of her lips made Din the exact opposite of curious. "He knows you didn't mean it, and he also knows it happened because you pressed him about the little boy. The little boy you could barely bring yourself to mention."

Din stared silently, not breaking from her calculating gaze to drink his cooling coffee. She let out a quiet 'heh' and shrugged.

"*He* thinks it's because that boy reminds you of Winta. You heard how old he is and you picture that little girl and it makes you want to save him the way you can't help her anymore." Din tensed all over, gut bubbling at how easily Luke made excuses for his bad behavior. Gave him the benefit of the doubt he didn't deserve in the least. "There's merit in that, I think, but I know something he doesn't. Something *you* don't."

"What?" Din blurted, eyebrows rising in confusion. He vaguely felt like he lost this strange stand-off they were in, but Leia wouldn't be telling him something like that as a *bluff*. That wasn't her style.

She suddenly looked uncomfortable, fidgeting in her chair as her fingers drummed against the mug rapidly and her eyes darted around the office. Looking anywhere but directly at him. And now *Din* was uncomfortable and confused. Leia was the definition of *direct*.

“Has Luke told you how he lost his hand or... or Project 66?” Leia forced out, her fingers finally still where they clutched the mug too tightly.

“... No.” The *what does that have to do with this* hung in the air between them.

“Of course not,” Leia muttered, the words all but spat out as her eyes narrowed at nothing. She sighed softly, the anger evaporating as quickly as it came. “He doesn’t like to admit that things aren’t his fault, or that he was left to die on purpose rather than because he personally failed.”

“*What*,” Din demanded, half-rising out of his chair, hands flat on the table.

“It was ten years ago, Din.”

“*Explain*, Leia.”

Din glared at her, pressing all his weight onto his hands to keep from rushing out of the room to do... something. Maybe chase Luke down and demand to know this story from *him*, and also make sure he was safe. Alive. Not left for dead in a jungle of a country Din had never seen.

“My brother joined the Marines right after we found out we were biologically related. We’d known each other our whole lives, play-dates and classmates every year and best friends. We were inseparable, but we thought it was just because *his* parents, who we were told were dead, were friends with *my* adoptive parents,” Leia explained quickly. “When we found out that not only were we siblings, *twins*, but that our biological father was alive and some bigwig Republican New York Senator... it hurt Luke, a *lot*, a lot more than it hurt me. I was just... annoyed, but mostly I was happy that Luke was really the brother I’d always wanted him to be.” She smiled



at the memory, a fleeting here and gone again thing as her eyes immediately fell to her hands. "But it was devastating for him, for a lot of reasons I can't say."

"Leia, what does this-" Din tried to demand. Leia raised her hand with a little nod.

"Sorry, I'll try and cut it short, but... it's a lot." Leia brushed a hand over her mouth. "The moment he joined the Marines, someone who knew our father targeted him. Snatched him up, put in a good word for him, counseled him and praised him. He *groomed* my brother into doing anything he wanted. This person used his connections to our father and dead mother to get Luke to trust him, and when he suggested Luke sign up to be part of some... experiments, something to make him a better soldier, stronger, faster, whatever, and my naive, golden boy brother said he wouldn't mind being considered. He was... randomly chosen to be part of it."

"Randomly," Din repeated with raised eyebrow and a twist to his mouth as nausea boiled in his stomach.

"Exactly. There was nothing random about it, but Luke thought this man, the military, whoever *they* all were, that they could all be trusted. He and his entire unit were selected and were the first test subjects in experimental drug trials. They were told it was going *expand their minds*."

"What the hell does that mean?" Din demanded, eyebrows rising.

Leia looked away, mouth pursing. "It means what it means," she said vaguely.

Without speaking, Din stared at her with his arms crossed over his chest. Finally, Leia drank the last of her coffee and sighed quietly.

"What matters is Luke's unit were the first guinea pigs. And, wouldn't you know it, Luke is the only one that came back home."

That wasn't very unexpected, Luke's nightmares had led Din to believe that terrible things had happened to a number of people whose names he'd called out to in his sleep. But...

“How did he get out?” Din heard himself ask. For once, Leia didn’t look at him as if he didn’t deserve his reputation as a damn good detective.

“Mara, actually. Mara and Han.” Leia pressed her fingers to her lips, eyes on her knees, breathing through her nose before looking up. “Mara and Luke started exchanging letters again a few years after he enlisted, and after she joined the Red Cross. They were both over there, and she reached out to him. It... It was... she told me she just needed a touchstone, in a way, something good in the massive shit she saw out there. She wanted him to know... well, they had unfinished business and she was ready to talk to him about it.” She waved that story away, though Din couldn’t help frowning in concern. “When Luke suddenly cut off contact, she got worried, and managed to get reassigned to a medical base near his last location, and found out that some war correspondent named Solo was the last person to have seen or talked to Luke’s unit. And that was almost a *year* before that, right around the time his letters to her were getting shorter and... redacted, *a lot*. Until they disappeared altogether.”

“Solo?”

“Yeah, I met Han *because* of Luke,” Leia said, smiling at Din. “He accidentally tripped over Luke’s unit in the jungle and followed them for awhile, even helped them out of a few tight spots. Until someone higher up started putting together his anonymous articles to several newspapers and his presence with Luke. He was good at keeping it vague, but... there was enough in there that they figured it out. Luke helped him to get away before he was caught, and Han came straight to me. We spent years trying to expose the... the *Project*,” Leia spat the word out, a deep-seated guilt carving lines across her face, “but Han just didn’t have enough evidence, and *mysteriously* no newspaper would touch his articles around the same time.”

“That explains a lot about Han now...” Din murmured. “And Mara tracked him down.”

“Yeah, she contacted Han, who went back to Nam,” Leia passed a hand over her face. “That was...” She shook her head, scowling darkly. “After months of no contact, I got an emergency telegram telling me I had to get Luke discharged *as soon as possible*. I hadn’t

bothered talking to Anakin in years. I met him once, right after Luke enlisted, and then cut off all contact. But I knew he was the only way to get Luke out of there.”

Din frowned. “I didn't know the Mayor was in the military?”

Leia’s burning stare at her hands broke at last, so she could raise her gaze to his. Her mouth actually dropped open slightly before her head tilted to her side.

“You... you don’t know?”

“Know *what*?”

Her lips rolled together and she closed her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was a little tight and shaky, mouth twitching at the corners, “He was a Senator, remember I said? In New York.” Din nodded once, still confused. “ He was a huge voice in the Senate to keep the war *going*. He was vocally very supportive of protecting democracy, and making sure the spread of Communism was stopped wherever, and whenever, and *however* possible. He had dozens of connections in the military, including Luke’s own mentor.”

“...” Din’s jaw tightened, his fingers digging into his arms to hold very still.

“Our father didn’t explicitly push Luke into it, he didn’t even ask Luke *think* about enlisting, but Luke knew about his pro-war message and votes. He’ll deny it now, but I know Luke better than he knows himself. He did it *because* of Anakin. And I made sure Anakin *knew* that. That he was about to lose his son forever, and if he didn’t do something, I’d make sure he’d never see his grandchildren, or be invited to my wedding.”

“And it worked.”

“Yes.” Leia pressed her fingers to her mouth again. Her lips were visibly shaking as her eyes looked straight through him. “Luke showed up a few weeks later, barely alive, and his hand amputated *badly*. Mara said when she and Han finally found him, he was feverish from infection, his hand still attached and... and *rotting*. He

was left to die on a dirty cot in a field hospital. His superiors swear up and down that they thought he was dead on the field, my father even had the MIA telegram, so they had crossed their 't's, but his *entire unit* was missing, Din. Not one body was recovered, and Luke was miles and miles away from his last known location. The field hospital had refused to explained why his care was so bad, and most of them, when my father and I tried to track them down, have gone missing, too. The others we did find were confirmed dead in the field within weeks of Luke being transported to Saigon.”

Silence fell between them as Leia’s shaking, horrified voice trailed off. He could almost see it in his mind’s eyes, the feverish and too pale Luke, worn down to skin and bone and dying. Every scream Din pretended like he hadn’t heard, every name, every whimper, the begging to *get rid of it*, it all ran sudden and fast through in mind with all this new context. Din passed a hand over his face.

“Why... why are you telling me any of this?” Din asked roughly. “This was years ago.”

“That whole thing, the drugs, the experiments, all his friends and subordinates dying, *Luke* almost dying... that was all under Project 66.”

Leia reached into her pocket and pulled out a... paper bracelet? Din frowned, eyes darting back up to hers, but held out his hand so she could drop it onto his palm. It took one quick glance for every muscle in Din’s body to tense, his fingers convulsing around the bracelet in his hand. Not just any paper bracelet, but a medical band, with simple black type stating [**P66 Subject 11 Condit**]*i>*—where it was torn off.

“There were five soldiers in Luke’s unit, including himself.”

“Five subjects,” Din said quietly, his eyes on the '11'.

“Chewie found that last night. Instead of giving it to Luke, he gave it to Han first. There’s a drain pipe that goes under the fence that's placed around the lab. It’s small, but if a small enough child tried to crawl through...” Leia stopped, letting it lie between them.

"A drain pipe... It'd have to be a very small child," Din said, meeting her eyes while, in his mind, he pictured the Kid curled up in the corner of his closet. Disappearing under his pile of blankets. "Why didn't you give this to me immediately?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. They *kill* innocent bystanders as well as their own."

"Kuiil." Leia's mouth snapped shut and her eyes darted away. Enough of a tell that Din's eyes narrowed. "You think they're the ones that killed Kuiil."

"I... I wouldn't be surprised."

"Does Luke know?"

Leia shook her head. "He *can't*. He doesn't like that lab because it's military owned. Knowing that Project 66 is actually in there? That they're using children now? That there's six more—I can't... I can't imagine what he'd do."

Din curled his hand into a fist, the wristband disappearing under his fingers.

"Wherever that child is, death is going to follow him, Din. He *has* to be found. And Luke can't know."

"What are you suggesting? Send the kid back to the lab?"

"*Of course not*. They're *monsters*," Leia spat vehemently, eyes flashing. Din stared at her, eyebrows rising again. She licked her bottom lip and pulled it between her teeth for a brief minute. Finally, Leia pulled out a card and slid it over the desk. "She can help. If you find him, use that."

Din glanced at it, but didn't make a move for it. Not yet. His attention was still riveted to the medical band in his hand. There wasn't much of it there. Barely enough to encircle a few of his fingers. A very small band for a very thin wrist. His throat burned again, and it tasted like fury.

She got up and smoothed her hands down her suit jacket. "My

husband is probably tied up in a chair somewhere while the twins run all over him. Lord knows Ben won't help. I better get home." Leia stopped and leaned closer to tap the card. "I don't know exactly how you're going to make things right with Luke, but this? Is a start. I know you care about him as much as I do." Leia plucked the empty mug out of his hand. "And Din?" He swallowed hard and met her gaze. It was softer, kinder, and it reminded him not-quite-painfully of Mamá Arma. "I'm sorry about Kuiil."

Din jerked in place, breath punched out of his chest, but managed a grateful nod. She smiled sadly and left. As the *tink* of mugs sounded from outside his door, Din slid the card closer over his desk to eye it suspiciously. It was dark blue with a name typed in blocky, easy to read black, a small white symbol stamped deeply into the thick card surface beside the capitalized A. It looked like a shield with an eagle head, and vaguely familiar. A D.C. address was stamped under the name and a phone number that had the D.C. area code.

Din lifted it and wondered why the hell Leia had given him the name of some government spook. Just who the hell was this Ahsoka Tano?

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Gravel flew from under the Sunbird's tires, pattering against the chassis of the car as Poe all but spun out turning onto the drive towards Jakku Junkyard. Old Plutt could be a real asshole, but the few summers Finn and Rey had done odd jobs for him, he was almost *kind*. In a gruff, rude way, but kind. Mostly, he seemed to take not-so-secret joy in selling old lemons or sadly shaking his head and saying nothing could be done to fix a perfectly fixable vehicle to the cityfolk occasionally driving through. He'd wink at whichever teen had caught him at it, smirk and touch a finger to his nose. Then, he'd roughly tell them to bugger off, he was paying them to *work*, not sit on their bums.

The summer-hazy memories flitted in and out of Rey's mind as the Sunbird pulled up to a stop outside the decrepit arch of an entrance. The iron railings were pitted with rust, and the wooden sign was

defying gravity while barely hanging from long, rusty nails. A surprisingly short time later, Ben's old Beetle chugged into sight, the brakes screeching a little too loudly when he hit them suddenly. The trio were already unfolding themselves from Poe's car when Ben leaned over the seats and struggled to roll down his passenger window.

"Why are you stopping? The junkyard's still, like, a mile down the road," Ben demanded, voice pitched loud enough to be heard over his engine and the distance.

Rey rolled her eyes and popped Poe's trunk while the boys talked.

"It's not a mile, man. It's less than a quarter of one. We gotta sneak up, or Plutt's gonna kick us right out. It's not a 'playground for goofing off,'" Finn said, using his fingers to make air-quotes and rolling his eyes when he mimicked Plutt's rough grumble.

"Not that it matters, he probably heard that deathtrap's racket already," Rey muttered into the depths of the Sunbird's trunk.

"Rey," Poe said from right behind her, making her jump slightly. She had thought he'd gone over with Finn. "He's here to help. He's *already* helped. Play nice."

Rey scowled at the large flashlight lantern she held in her hands.

"Look, you don't *get it*," she started, voice pitched low and tight.

"No, I don't." Poe interrupted, which made her bristle all over like a cat. "Not totally. But I know a lot more than you think."

She sighed. "Finn?" she questioned, already knowing the answer, as she straightened up and rolled the light in her hands.

"Well, he had to hang out with someone when you were hopping on the bed scream-singing The Kinks with Rose." Poe winked at her. She felt her cheeks heat, her mouth twitching upwards, and she not-really-punched Poe's shoulder. The bug's engine cut off with a smog-heavy chortle, and they both looked over to see Finn helping a grimacing Ben yank open the front hood and dig through the cargo space.

"I don't wanna talk about it. Not now," Rey said before Poe could get started. "Rose is in trouble, the radio at school *exploded* from us trying to *talk* to her. If you wanna lecture me about forgivin' and forgettin', it'll have to wait."

"Eh, I don't like to lecture anyway. Just... keep in mind that Rose thinks he's worth knowing for a reason."

Rey sighed again, but nodded. Finn and Ben shuffled up seconds later, Finn with an old wooden bat and Ben with the promised crowbar and a-

"Is that a *rifle*?" Poe hissed. Rey snorted at the same time Finn grinned and Ben rolled his eyes.

"It's a BB gun, dumbass," Ben huffed. "You think my mom would let me have a real rifle?"

"Your mom lets you take it to *school*, though?" Rey asked, eyebrow quirking. Ben's pale face flushed a little too red, his ears looking downright sunburnt as he looked anywhere but her.

"I could just leave it in the bug," he mumbled.

"No, you should bring it. We promise not to tell Ms. Organa," Finn joked, clapped Ben's shoulder and took the crowbar to hand over to Rey. She thrust the lantern flashlight into Poe's hands and took the crowbar. She felt a whole lot safer and... *ready-er* with it warming between her palms.

"Why are you guys... a BB gun, and what is that, a *tire iron*? Aren't you guys being a little over-prepared here?" Poe asked, flicking the flashlight on to lead the way.

"You didn't hear it," Rey reminded grimly. Her hands tightened around the reassuring weight of iron in her hands.

"And my dad told me that there's been two people dead so far. One of them a *cop*," Ben said, checking his air rifle with a grim expression almost identical to Rey's. "I'm not taking chances."

Finn and Rey exchanged worried glances, the latter inhaling a little



sharply.

“You think whoever’s doing *that* is one who took *Rose*?” Poe blurted incredulously. His lips twitched into a not-quite smirk, dark eyes darting between the other three teens rapidly. The not-smirk faded, eyes pinching at the corners, and he swallowed hard. “Wouldn’t... wouldn’t she be d—”

“No. She wouldn’t be,” Finn cut in. He and Poe locked eyes and a complicated array of motions flitted over their faces. Finally, Poe nodded sharply, frowned.

“All right.” He tightened his grip around the handle of the flashlight and squared his shoulders.

“C’mon, we’ll head around the fence. We don’t wanna walk right past the office... well, it’s basically a shack, but Plutt spends all day in there. Me n’ Finn know where there’s a break in the fence.” With that, Rey immediately started into the woods. Ben was already on her heels, and she cast an annoyed glance back at him only to catch a glimpse of Finn gripping Poe’s free hand beyond Ben’s lanky frame. She jerked back around.

She concentrated on putting each foot in front of the other, squinting through the gloom and shade. Twigs snapped under the tattered soles of her shoes, and wind whistled through the pines around them, stirring leaves and twisting around her ankles where her jeans rode up a little too high above her shoes. She shivered under the thin layer of her jacket, but her cheeks burned red hot. She didn’t even realize she was curled around the crowbar, her bony arms pressed tight against her sides, until Ben had his hand on her arm.

“Hey, she’ll be—Whoa!” Ben stepped aside, his hand up in the air and his eyes wide when Rey flinched, *hard*, away from him and glared. The moment of wide-eyed boyish surprise disappeared under a scowl. “Jesus, I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“I don’t need your help walking through the woods!” She pulled her jacket tighter around her torso. She wanted to walk back to Finn and Poe, set herself between them where it’d be *safe*, but...

Finn and Poe... it wasn't often they got to do stuff like that. Hold hands or... or just *look* at each other without speaking. Finn had told her they weren't dating or anything like that, but he'd also said those were his favorites moments. That it made his heart beat too fast and like he couldn't stop smiling, like he couldn't believe a guy like *Poe* would look at him like *that*.

Rey had let him talk and felt like a shitty friend for not telling him... telling him she knew exactly what he meant.

"She'll be fine. She'll be there," Ben muttered at her side. She glanced at him out the corner of her eye. "That's all I was going to say."

She bit her bottom lip, reminded herself *play nice*, and muttered, "Thanks."

Silence fell between them again, but it didn't feel so... so uncomfortable. Leaves slithered over the ground and the shadows under the trees got darker, thicker. Sounds not the wind were strangely muted, the skitter of small rodents rare and swift, the shadow of a passing bird or bat there and gone so quickly Rey didn't even see the animal. From behind a line of pine trees, the ten-foot tall chain-link fence rose. Rey rushed over, grabbing the fence and peering through the piles of junked cars and rusted parts and barrel drums. Across the yard there was a glimmer of light in the office. Which was annoying and a bit surprising. Plutt liked to leave as soon as he could, and, in the winter, that usually meant as soon as it got dark. If they were lucky, he would leave soon.

She ran around the edge of the fence. Almost distantly she could hear the boys hot on her trail. They were shuffling, trying not to rattle the fence or make too much noise in general, but it was a relief to see the break in the fence. Rey tossed the crowbar through first, gripped the rings, and then slid under the hole like a baseball player sliding home. She was up and peering around the edge of an old Chevy, ignoring the dirt trickling down her socks, as the boys clambered up behind her. Luckily, it was Finn at her back with his hand on her shoulder.

"Try the radio," Finn whispered.

Rey licked her lips, fumbling with the old walkietalkie, eyes glued to the rundown office. White noise broke through the dark stillness. Finn and Rey jumped like startled cats and she pressed the walkietalkie to her chest, muffling the noise as they stared towards the square of light.

“Look, I’ll go keep an eye on Plutt. You hear me say, uh, I dunno, boogaloo, run for it,” Poe said, slipping past them and handing the flashlight to Finn.

“What?” Rey hissed.

“Boogaloo?” Ben repeated dryly.

“What? It’s the first word I thought of,” Poe said, smirking. “I’m a good distracter, adults love me. If he comes out, I’ll keep him busy while you guys get to the bug. We don’t *all* wanna get in trouble, right? If I’m lucky, I’ll be right behind you guys.” He winked at them and tiptoed out of sight around a teetering pile of busted and gutted cars. He moved pretty damn gracefully. Maybe all that soccer and basketball was useful somehow.

“All right, let’s start looking,” Rey whispered. The remaining three exchanged looks and took bracing gulps of air before slowly making their way through the junkyard.

They kept close, the quiet shuffle of their shoes a comforting background noise. Across the yard, in the shack of an office, Plutt was playing his usual bluegrass and folk, the annoying twang of banjos an odd juxtaposition to the encroaching darkness and the way Rey’s breath continually caught in her throat. Every shadow felt menacing, that static-y snarl echoing in her mind; every hair on her body rose; every inch of her skin goosepimpled even when the winter breeze was blocked by steel chassis and piles of falling apart tires. Methodically and wincingly careful, they checked every hiding place in their corner of the lot, moving onto the next square inch with unusual fastidiousness. Despair began curling heavy and icy in Rey’s gut with each empty space when Finn’s shockingly warm fingers touched the back of her neck. She spun around to see him pointing with the jut of his chin towards Ben, who was gesturing towards an old, retired school bus. Of any leftover bit of junk, the bus was the

newest and probably the most comfortable. The door had been yanked ajar, just enough for a skinny twig of a teen to shimmy through. Rose was maybe a little stouter than Rey's too thin frame, but she was smaller overall. She could have, conceivably, fit through.

"It's gonna make noise," Ben whispered in warning when they made it to his side. "Get in fast, keep low."

"Poe will keep his promise," Finn added.

"Besides, if Rose *is* in there, who cares if Plutt finds out," Rey said with a stubborn twist of her mouth. She strode towards the bus, shifting her grip on the crowbar. It was just light enough to still see, their eyes adjusting naturally as the evening continued to the dim. She gave one more glance to the office, to the two frowning boys behind her, then jammed her crowbar in the crack of the door and *yanked*.

It creaked open; the squeals of hinges and out of use air locks whipped through the air and made all three teens wince. They hurled themselves through the door. Rey's toes caught on the steps, and she crawled into the aisle between the bus benches, fingers scrabbling over the worn leather seat covers as she struggled to catch her balance. Banjos cut off and they huddled on the ground, their breaths choppy and low. Rey's scalp prickled—

—and she heard it.

Breathing. Soft terrified breathing. And the weird gurgle of wet snarls. Cold air, colder than anything she'd ever felt, colder than the winter air blowing over snow and through the pine trees in the dead air of January, trailed along her right side.

"Rose?" Rey whispered. Ben and Finn flinched, but Rey ignored them and crouch-walked her way down the seats, peering around seats and whispering Rose's name. Following that sick cold that felt *wrong*. Wet and icy and *black*. "*Rose!*"

"Is she here?" Finn asked, crawling after Rey, all but flattening to his stomach to peer under the seats.

“Rose!” Ben called hoarsely, barely keeping his voice quiet.

Static burst through the dead air, all of them jumping, Finn letting out a little crack of a shout. Before Ben could hiss at him to shut up, Finn had covered his mouth with his hand. Rey was shaking her walkietalkie, tapping at the off button, but it immediately crackled back to life. In Finn's hand, the flashlight began to flicker.

“What’s happening?” Rey gasped, fingers and lips numb.

“Who’s out there?” Plutt’s all too familiar growl yelled over the yard.

“Turn it *off*,” Ben snarled at Finn.

“I’m *trying*!” Finn snapped back. Rey snatched it out of his frantically shaking hands and tucked it under her coat while she smothered the walkie against her chest, breaths panting out of her like a cornered animal, as that low, wet snarl *breathed* through the bus. “Rose,” she whispered again.

“She’s gotta be somewhere else, let’s get outta here,” Finn said, grabbing at Rey’s elbow. She shook him off and continued to crabwalk her way down the bus.

“No, no, she’s *here*. She’s *here*, can’t you feel her? I... I can *hear it*,” Rey murmured. The walkie fell to the ground carelessly, the white noise erupting.

“What are you *doing*?” Ben shoved past Finn, crouched over and hurrying to grab Rey around the shoulders and pull her back. “We gotta go.”

“Get *off* me- *Rose*! I can hear you, Rose, where are you?” Rey cried out. She didn’t care how loud she was as she flung around a seat to stare...

At an empty bench.

“Rose,” Rey breathed out. She fell onto her knees, the crack of metal under her knees happening to someone else’s body, someone else’s knees. Questing, desperate hands patted at the seat, the back of the next seat, the metal wall of the bus—she pulled away with a hiss at

the *cold* there.

“That’s it, I can *hear* y’all, ya good fer nuthun kids. Git the hell outta my yard!” Plutt bellowed. There was a series of smacks as his office door bounced against its frame a few times. “I’ll give y’all a count o’ three n’ I’m siccin’ the dogs on ya!”

Plutt didn’t actually *have* dogs, but he did have a meaty set of arms. Teenagers or not, he would rough them up for being on his property. Finn hissed and snatched the walkietalkie off the floor, only to freeze.

“ ... *Rey? Be...*”

“Is that—Can you...” Finn breathed out.

“What is that? Is that Rose?” Ben asked, his voice moving farther away from Rey.

Rey could hear them, kind of, but her attention was on the wall. She raised the flashlight and, beneath its rapid-fire blinking, she could see it. Where metal slats were welded together, where bolts were holding the walls in place, greyish pink sludge had oozed out of the cracks. Slowly, every hair once again standing, only the sound of her own breaths in her ears, she raised her hand, eyes glued to a strange gooey substance. Fingers trembling as badly as the flashlight was blinking, Rey reached, paused, terror *tangibly* trailing down her body. Everything in her screamed to *not touch, get away, it’s bad bad bad*.

There was a loud clatter, loud enough it covered the sound of the walkie’s in-and-out static, the loud gasps from Finn and Ben, the clamor of Rey’s whole body flinging away from the wall and onto the ground, and most of Plutt’s enraged shouts. There was a chattering scream of ... a raccoon? And more clattering and bangs as Plutt raged and cursed at woodland creatures in general and threatened to get out his shotgun.

Finn was half-laughing, hands clenched around the walkie, and Ben was breathing hard and ragged, leaning his rifle against the nearest seat. But Rey was already on her feet and snatching the walkie right out of Finn’s hands.

“Rose?” Rey whispered. She released the button and whitenoise returned. Then, cut off. She grasped at it harder as a headache bloomed behind her right eye. Then,

“Rey!”

Clearer than it had ever been. Ben and Finn stared and Rey let out a wobbly, wet laugh and pressed the walkie to her mouth, ignoring the tickle of wetness sliding down her upper lip.

“Rose! It’s me. Where *are* you? We’re here, Ro, we’re at the junkyard.”

“... *at Jakku... I’m in the bus...*” Rose’s shaking voice replied.

Ben’s hand wrapped around Rey’s and he brought the radio towards him. “*We’re* in the bus,” he said, scowling so hard his eyebrows were one over his nose. “You’re not here, Rose.”

“*Ben? It is Ben,*” Rose said with a shaky laugh. “*Of course me disappearing made you—oh. Oh, god.*”

“Rose, what’s wrong?” Rey asked, yanking her hand and walkie back.

There was a long silence until Rose spoke again. “*It’s coming. It’s coming here.*”

Horror tightened Rey’s guts into knots, her throat constricting around a hot stone. Her voice barely puffs of air, Rey asked, “what is it?”

“*I don’t know, I don’t know,*” Rose whispered. The static was getting louder, distorting her words even more effectively than the fear. Rey gripped the walkie in both her shaking hands, the headache piercing like a knife and her nose stinging. “*Rey, I want out. I don’t know how to get out.*”

“Get out of what, Rose? Explain what you see, we’ll find you!” Finn said.

The flashlight, long dropped to the ground and rolled under a seat by Finn’s foot, began to flicker.

*"It's com... get..... run."*

"No, I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to find you, Rose!" Rey shouted into the walkie. She rubbed at the annoying tickle, blood smearing over the back of her hand and the cuff of her sleeve. "ROSE!"

*"I don't... dark... cold... it's coming..."*

Rey's breath sobbed out of her, chest heaving, choking. Her tears all but burned her face, and the two boys looked away awkwardly as their hands curled tighter around the weapons they held. Rey automatically reached out for the forsaken crowbar, terror screaming at her to run, to fight, to *run*.

And Rose didn't have Finn. Or a crowbar. Or even Ben with his air rifle.

She licked her dry lips, the copper tang of blood on her tongue, and held the walkie to her mouth. "I'm coming, Ro. I promise, I *promise* I'm going to find you, okay? But run, just *run*."

Static answered and Rey shuddered with the force of her sobs.

The bus door screamed open and the three teens shrieked and turned. Ben's rifle pointed towards the door, Rey and Finn held up their melee tools, but a single hand waved around the seats.

"It's me! We gotta go, and *now*." Poe leaned around the first seat and then immediately ducked back out of sight. "Drop the *fucking gun*!"

"It's just a—"

"I don't *care*!"

When Poe leaned around again, Ben had re-hung the air rifle over his shoulder, scowling harder, and Finn had dug the flickering flashlight out from under the seat.

"I managed to flush out a raccoon from its nest and Plutt, I dunno, scraped his arm on something. He was yelling about tetanus, damn kids, and raccoons all at the same time, but he'll be out of the office



and looking for us. Raccoons don't exactly scream 'Rose', did you-

"Let's go," Rey said roughly.

"Yeah, we need... we need to go." The flashlight in Finn's hand cut out as he spoke. A shiver ran down the trio's spines, Rose's warning repeating in their heads. "Go. GO."

Poe stared incomprehensibly, but he was out of their way in time for them to fall through the door, and running with them without protest. They darted and dodged around piles of junk, their breaths too loud and harsh. Finn slid under the fence first, grabbing Ben's rifle, juggling it and the bat and flashlight, so Ben could follow, Poe tugging Rey with him to the fence.

Because, nonsensically, she'd stopped.

She stared over her shoulder, through the lumbering piles of cars and junk towards the shack office. Breath stolen, heart frozen, her eyes caught on the wild flickering of the office light. There was a scream inside her head, screaming to go back, there was something horribly horribly *wrong* there.

But it was just a light. It was a flickering light bulb in a shack that should've been torn down years ago.

Poe tugged at her hand again. With hot tears rolling down the icy skin on her face, Rey followed him. Slid under the tear in the fence and raced towards their cars.

"What *was that* what *was that* what *was that*," Finn chanted wildly, hands gripping the wooden bat horizontally across his chest and eyes so wide the whites of them glowed in the evening gloom.

"What was *what*?" Poe demanded, keeping one hand on Finn's elbow as the flashlight's beam bounced wildly in front of them.

"This is *insane*, this isn't happening, no way," Ben muttered under his breath, too quiet for anyone else to hear. But Rey was next him, his longer legs keeping pace with her quick steps.

She cut a look at him, almost *worried* at the pallor of his already pale

face and the sheen of sweat rolling down his jaw. His dark eyes met hers, and, for just a second, she reached out and grabbed his hand. It was clammy and as icy cold as her own. Then, she dropped his hand and skidded to a stop by the Sunbird.

“Is *anyone* gonna tell me why we were running like that?” Poe gasped, hands on his knees as he gulped in air.

“Why are we stopping? We need to *go*,” Rey burst out, pawing at Poe’s letterman jacket for the pocket, and the keys therein. Poe batted her hands away with a hurried *whoa whoa*, but the jangle of them in his hand had her nerves soothing slightly.

“We have to—We have to tell someone, Rey!”

“Tell who!?” Ben and Rey shouted at Finn, barely milliseconds apart.

“Don’t take it out on him!” Poe interrupted fiercely, getting between the wide-eyed and still shaking Finn and the red-faced Rey and Ben. “What the *hell* is going on? Plutt might’ve given us a yell or two, might’ve gotten us in trouble with—”

“Who *cares* about Plutt, or our parents, or any of that shit!” Ben snarled. “That was... what we heard, that was *impossible!*”

“She was *there*, Poe. She was *there* and she wasn’t at the same time. We were so *close!*” Rey turned with a scream and kicked the Sunbird’s tire. Poe winced, but pressed his lips into a thin line without a word.

“That wasn’t fucking *possible*,” Ben repeated with a shaky hand rubbing over his face.

“What?”

“Poe, it was Rose. She... It was like she was a ghost...” Finn whispered. He moved, as if to rub at his chilled arms, and the beam of light in his hand cut across the cars, the drive, the three other teens standing around uselessly.

“She’s *not*, *shut up*, Finn!” Rey screamed. Poe and Ben reared back. But Finn actually jerked out himself, blinking sluggishly as if he were

waking up, and stepped forward. “She’s *not*, she’s *not* a *ghost*. She’s not dead! She’s... she was there, she was *there*, Finn,” Rey babbled, hands rising as soon as Finn got close. His arms were around her waist and she was clutching at his shirtfront, sobbing and twisting the cloth in her fists. The crowbar and bat thudded forgotten to the ground. “She was right there, Finn. Why couldn’t we see her? What was *that*? She’s in danger, she’s *in danger*.”

“I know, I know, Rey,” Finn whispered. His hand smoothed over her head, down her back, then started once more from her crown and smoothed down her hair and back. Repeating the movement again and again as she sobbed.

Off to the side, Poe ran a hand through his hair, grimacing at the cold sweat and looked anywhere but the two. He ended up looking at Ben. Who was slouching where he stood, hands shoved deep in his pockets, face shadowed under the curtain of his hair.

“Hey, um, you wanna explain...?” he started hesitantly.

Ben turned and walked away without a word, the air rifle bouncing against his back from its strap. Poe sighed. By then, Finn was looking at him over Rey’s head, who sniffled as she pulled herself together. The sputtering and screech of the Beetle coming to life jerked her away from Finn and she spun around to see Ben peel out of the drive. Or, well, peel out as much as an old 70s Beetle *could* peel out.

“We should probably get home...” Poe said, breaking the awkward silence at last.

“Uh, yeah,” Finn cleared his throat.

“I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight,” Rey admitted, rubbed at her face with her jacket sleeves, her face suddenly hot and her eyes unable to meet Poe or Finn’s. She was even more relieved Ben was gone and not there to see the mess of her face. She paused, staring at the dark and mostly dry stain on her jacket sleeve.

Rey hadn’t had nosebleeds this often since she was a kid. The state-social worker had said the stress of her parents sudden death, the move, her tumultuous new relationship with her grandfather, it

had all been the root of those nosebleeds and headaches and insomnia. Getting to know Finn's family, staying out of her house as much as she possibly could, had helped a lot. She thumbed at the bottom of her nose and leaned down to pick up the dropped crowbar and bat. Her thumb was clean, and, when she looked around, Poe and Finn were talking in low voices, their foreheads almost touching, Poe's hands on Finn's biceps, rubbing up and down gently.

Rey turned away quickly and thumbed at her nose one more time, the phantom tickle of blood harder to wipe away.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This should be the last real "set up" chapter (so sorry about the whole no dinluke at all ;w; it hurt me too). Wednesday everything sorta starts... going to hell, yes, MORE to hell (but lots more dinluke, so that's good right???).

## 5. Wednesday Pt I

### Summary for the Chapter:

This was all... all so insane. She was so far out of her depth, but she had no one, no adult to ask for help. What could Finn's parents do? Mr. Fisto? Or even Sheriff Djarin with his kind, tired eyes?

They were all normal people, normal adults, living their boring, normal adult lives. This was so far out of the realm of normal how would she be able to convince them it was real? How could she get any sort of help? What could any of them do?

### Notes for the Chapter:

Warning for: a mildly(?) homophobic slur, a short slightly bloody fight, some implied anti-Asian hate (more warning because of recent events than anything), and discussions of death

Every breath of wind through the trees outside had Rey freezing under her blanket. Every wrinkle of her shirt, her shorts, her sheets, dug into her back, her sides, her arms whenever she lay too still too long. The low murmur of the TV down the hall, usually so easy to ignore, instead pounded in her ears, into her brain with every manufactured laugh, live-audience cheer, and perky jingle. She kicked off her blanket, then wrapped herself up in a burrito, then stared at the ceiling with every limb outstretched, until she finally sat up against the wall at the head of her bed and curled around her knees. In the dim glow of the street lamp, she could see her toes curling, uncurling, curling against her dingy broadcloth sheets with tiny flowers so faded by years and washes they looked more like discolored splotches.

No matter how late it had gotten, how *tired* she was, she couldn't sleep. Couldn't turn off the quiet *ssshhh sshhh* of the the walkietalkie in her head, or the frayed and tattered words Rose managed to get through.

Home. But not like home. Cold. And dark. And *right there*. She was *right there*.

Rey *tsked*, laced her fingers over the back of her head, and pressed her eyes to her kneecaps so hard starbursts went off behind her eyelids.

Ben had been right. This was all... all so *insane*. She was so far out of her depth, but she had no one, no *adult* to ask for help. What could Finn's parents do? Mr. Fisto? Or even Sheriff Djarin with his kind, tired eyes?

They were all normal people, normal adults, living their boring, normal adult lives. This was so far out of the realm of *normal* how would she be able to convince them it was real? How could she get any sort of help? What could any of them do?

This was *Hawkins* not... what was that book? The one Ben's uncle gave Rose? Oh, yeah. This wasn't *The Hobbit*. Although, *now* she wished she had gotten around to reading those other books, with the whole magic wizards and evil eye guy. Bilbo's love of trout and riddles sadly wouldn't help her out here, but maybe there would have been something helpful in the bigger books. It had seemed like a whole lot of *words*, though, and Rey preferred listening to music and working at the junkyard to reading.

Thinking about the junkyard made her think about what had happened hours ago all over again. She groaned and lifted her head, staring out her window as it replayed— every agonizingly, terrifyingly helpless moment.

With a slow, sleepy blink, Rey suddenly pictured the flashlight. How it had flashed and flickered. How it hadn't been switched on to begin with, and had immediately gone dark when Rose had run.

Had... had the flashlight... been reacting to *Rose*?

Rey's legs swung over the bed and she was following her feet before she fully finished her thought process. Yesterday's jeans and a secondhand sweater with puffy paint in Pollack-like designs across the front, and then her bare feet quickly jammed into her worn out

boots. She grabbed her walkietalkie and flashlight, silently hoping the batteries in both would hold out a bit longer, and tiptoed down the hall, easily sidestepping the weak spots and loose floorboards.

In the living/dining room, her grandfather whistled as he snored. The TV played on, the fast-moving shadows playing over his face, etching each line and wrinkle with a depth she barely noticed during the day. He slept much more often in his La-Z-Boy recliner than on the air mattress in his room, often saying there was no way they could afford a new mattress on the welfare check, especially with the extra mouth to feed—*her*.

Rey bit her bottom lip, closed her eyes, breathed in, out, then finally opened her eyes and crept around the back of the recliner towards the front door. It creaked under her hand, the sharp noise cutting through the sound of her grandfather's snores. Rey threw herself through the thin space, her shoulder scraping painfully against the jamb. The door closed and she jumped from the not-quite a porch. Gravel crunched under her boots as her broken laces slapped at her shins through her jeans. She was racing through the shadows between the mobile homes and trailers, unable to slow down lest she fall on her face.

The light overhead stayed steady, bright and orange. So very unlike the night she let Rose walk home alone. It felt like weeks had gone by already, not just a day. Two days now, probably. She wasn't sure if it had quite been three yet when she'd given up on sleep, but it was definitely past midnight. She stood panting in front of the Tico home, flashlight and walkie in each hand, as she stared at the caution tape. It only crossed the front door, it didn't encircle the entire home, and, after a moment of knuckle-biting hesitation, she darted around the back of the house. To Rose's window. While it was closed, Rey knew for a fact the lock had broken months and months ago. So even if the police had secured it...

There was a quiet screech and *clunk* and Rey was pushing the window up with a small grunt. She was a bit short for this, but... she stretched as tall as she could on her toes, hooked as much of her arm as she could over the sill, and, with a grunt muffled behind her teeth, yanked herself off her feet. The edge of the sill pressed hard through canvas and cotton layers, then dug uncomfortably into her ribs when

she managed to slither through the opening. Her feet kicked hard, as if that could propel her through the window faster, and she tossed both walkie and flashlight into Rose's room the moment they began to dig into her hips. They clattered to the floor. With another kick and mighty shove of her quivering arms, her whole body followed.

"Ooooww," she moaned softly, rolling onto her back and curling around her crushed ribs and surely bruised pelvis area. Light flickered over her face and she rolled away with a quiet groan. "Oh my god," she gasped, sitting up suddenly. Rey blinked rapidly, staring at the flashlight that sluggishly lit up, faded out, then lit up. "Rose?"

Flicker.

Rey scrambled to her feet and snatched up the flashlight. Breath caught, flashlight pressed to her chest, she shuffled over the carpet. The quiet *shhh* of the carpet under her boots sounded eerily like the white noise of her walkie, but it lay on the ground soundless. Rey dodged a pile of books, a box full of cassettes and records, and the desk covered in AV Club-looking equipment and tools that looked very similar to what Rey used out at Jakku, though smaller and more expensive, the light blinking faster and faster. Her butt hit the closet door and the flashlight flickered so fast it made Rey dizzy. A grin sprung up across her face as she covered up the light with a hand.

"Rose, it's you, right? It's you?"

It flickered again wildly, the back of her hand lit up red and creepily translucent. Rey pulled open the closet door, crouched down, and crawled to the back corner, under long cotton dresses and weirdly, thick smocks that smelled like smoke and melted plastic.

"Hey, Ro, I... I'm so sorry," Rey burst out, cupping the flashlight where it formed a cup around the light bulb inside and pressing her forehead to the edge of it. "I'm *so sorry* I couldn't find you."

The light went out. As fear knotted her throat, it suddenly flashed; once, twice. Then, out. Then, twice again.

"Oh, oh god, you're talking. You're trying to—" Rey sniffled—when had she started crying? *useless*—and rubbed at her eyes with the heel



of her palm. “Okay, so. Flashes. Like Morse code, but simple, right? Cuz I don’t know that, but if *you* know I’ll learn it—right, not helpful now.” She laughed at the slow, double-blink. “So um... two blinks. That’s gotta mean yes or no. Two blinks for... no? Are you saying no?”

One blink.

“One blink, yes. Two blinks, no,” Rey confirmed, half-laughing again, more sheer relief than amusement as again the flashlight blinked. “Okay, so, yes or no questions. I can do that. I... *Crap*, Rose, I can’t do that. I can’t. I don’t know what to *do*, Rose.”

Instead of blinking, the light shined steadily and golden and impossibly warm. Rey’s lips trembled around a small smile as she laughed, tears clinging to her bottom lashes.

“Yeah, yeah, I can,” she whispered. She closed her eyes, formed in her mind’s eye the shape of her friend. The wisps of straight black hair around Rose’s round face and falling into her black eyes. The exact shape of Rose’s encouraging smile, the same one Rey got when she worked through a particularly difficult math equation or understood the themes of the latest novel. Her hands, smaller and barely tanner than Rey’s, were wrapped around hers. With that encouraging, if unrealistic, image in mind, Rey tried again. “Okay, firstly. Are you... you’re not a ghost, are you?”

The flashlight blinked twice, quickly, and Rey snorted, imagining Rose’s rolling eyes on the other side of the beam.

“Good, thank *god*, Finn... you know Finn. He’s a little more superstitious than you and me, yanno? I’ll make sure to tell him you’re not a ghost... ‘cuz... cuz you’re alive?”

One blink.

Rey pressed her knuckles to her mouth, inhaling shakily. “Is it... is it a man chasing you?” She already knew the answer, but the two blinks still made her heart clench. The light seemed to shake, weak and faded. Until they came back, steadier, brighter, and only two.

“Do you know what it is?” Rey whispered.

A long pause, then two blinks. Rey fell back against the wall, her breath leaving in a loud *whoosh*. “Shit.”

One blink.

“That was not a question, Rose!” But she laughed weakly as she said it. “Do you know how I can find you?”

A longer pause until two shaky blinks. Rey bit her lip and exhaled heavily.

“Okay, do you know how to... how get... out? Away? Back here, to the *here* here?”

Another two blinks.

“Rose, do you even know where you are?” Rey asked desperately, fingers clutching tight to the flashlight.

One blink. Two blinks. Then, again, one and two.

“Yes and no, fuck, do you know how I can help you at all?”

Two blinks.

“I’m *going to*,” Rey growled. She looked around, squinting through the dark. As if she could look hard enough and see Rose sitting right there for real. “I’m going to figure it out and I’m going to get you *home*, okay? Wherever you are, whatever *home* that is, I’m bringing back to *this one*. To me *a-and* Paige and Finn and Poe. And, ugh, Ben, too.”

There was nothing. And Rey reached out with her hand, carefully swinging it through the air.

“Rose, did you hear me? I’m coming, okay? I’m coming for you, I promise, I’m not gonna give up so you... you stay alive, okay?”

The flashlight turned on and shone bright. A beam of golden light that reached the ceiling over Rey’s head. She let out a loud, trembling

breath and clutched at the flashlight in both hands. Wishing fervently it was Rose's hand between hers.

"That's right, Rose. I'm coming," she whispered. She slumped back against the closet wall and held the flashlight to her too-fast thumping heart. "It's gonna be okay."

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Although the night before had ended rather late for him (getting home from the department well after 8 PM to a grumbly, teary-eyed child who spent ten minutes glaring at a wall and gnawing on his own fingers until Din finished making some half-assed grilled discount beef and fresh avocado sandwiches which had returned him to the Kid's good graces), Din was still wide awake hours before he had to be. He wasn't even sure if he had really fallen asleep. He had given up his bed to the Kid now that the window was "properly" sealed, so he'd contorted himself into his usual sleeping position on the sofa and then... stared at the ceiling for most of the night. His thumb rubbing along the edges of cardstock in his pocket as he stared.

Mind expanding experiments? Subject 11? Somehow being tied to whatever happened to *Luke* almost a decade ago? A business card for a government agent? His waking thoughts somehow bled into weird half-baked dreams of hospital rooms and black-n-white jungles of Southeast Asia and Luke holding out his prosthetic hand with a grin that day three years ago and the Kid's nose bleeding in front of the TV. Then, Din rolled to his side with a groan, rubbed a hand over his face, and sat up, bringing up a box to the coffee table. He kept only the closest lamp on while he looked through what evidence and testimonies were in the box, pausing to stare at the crime scene photos at the diner... pausing so long the sun came up and his eyes were too dry, open too long, too wide.

There was a creak of his bed's old hinges, the shuffle of feet on carpet, and the box was closed and tucked out of sight by the couch before the Kid made it down the hall. Big brown eyes peeked around

the wall. Din raised an eyebrow and hoped the Kid didn't notice the heavy circles or the redness of his eyes.

"Mornin'," he greeted, voice too rough. He cleared his throat and added, "I didn't hear any teeth brushing. You want Eggos or am I gonna have to eat them myself?"

The Kid squawked indignantly and ran back down the hallway. Listening to the sound of rushing water seconds later, Din stood with a groan and made his way slowly to the kitchen. He'd promised Eggos, but there was still some leftover fillings from the sandwiches last night he could whip up with eggs to make the Kid eat real food. As eggs turned golden and fluffy, and the smell of green beans, onions, churrasco, and tomatoes filled the air, Din frowned down at the pan and remembered that bracelet. And Leia's intensity as she all but begged him to keep it away from Luke, and to send the missing kid to some CIA spook if he were found. A creeping foreboding trailed down his spine like icy fingers, and he *knew* leaving the Kid alone in his house was a bad idea. Especially with the plans he'd been forming over the past 24 hours, maybe longer.

The lab was too coincidentally in the middle of everything. Din did *not* believe in coincidences. Finding out about Project 66, what little Leia had been able to tell him anyway, and seeing that tiny, child-sized bracelet yesterday, had only firmed his resolve. He needed to look into the lab. For all he knew, Luke's wildest theories were correct and they *had* kidnapped Rose Tico. She could be locked in some room getting tortured into *expanding her mind* or some shit. Even without the wild theories, the circumstances being what they were he'd be called out for negligence if he *didn't* at least put on a show of checking the place out.

The Kid shuffled down the hall again, giggling with each *schschsch* of his feet. Din carefully piled half the mess of eggs and veggies onto a plate with toasted Eggos waiting, before shaking a *lot* more spices and chilies onto the rest to make his own breakfast. The Kid was waiting at the table, bouncing in his seat, short legs swinging, as he eagerly reached out with grabby fingers. After setting his Eggo-laden plate down, Din fondly patted the Kid's head, making him *brr* quietly, like Artoo on his nice days, which make Din's mouth twitch up.

“Juice or milk?”

The Kid frowned, then made a few signs with his hands. Din stared before going over to his hanging jacket, digging through the pockets and dragging out one result of the *many* things he'd had on his to-do list yesterday. A poster of ASL signs Iggy kept upfront, frozen images of hands forming letters. When he pulled it out, trying to see if he could recognize anything, the Kid went *off*. Grunting, huffing, hands flying in the air.

“Wait, wait, slow down, Kid,” Din chuckled, kneeling and holding up his right hand. Slowly, with a frown digging grooves into the sides of his mouth, his hand curled into a fist, pinkie up, twisting his wrist to make the tail of a ‘j’ in the air. The Kid shook his head quickly, grabbed Din’s hand—he barely managed not to freeze in shock, it wasn’t often the Kid reached out to touch, although he preened under Din’s head pats—and painstakingly moved Din’s fingers into a fist, his thumb tucked under his fingers and poking out between his pinkie and ring finger knuckles.

“M-” Even as he spoke, the Kid was tugging at his pinkie and trying to untuck his thumb. “Ah, milk, right? M-I?”

The Kid’s hands dropped away and he grinned so wide his missing tooth showed.

“I was feeling milk today, too. But with coffee. Lots and lots of coffee,” Din agreed, muttering the last under his breath as he made his way back towards the fridge. He returned a few minutes later, a glass of milk and mug (the second, the first had been shotgunned) of coffee in his hands, to see the Kid standing on his chair, leaning over the table to stuff one of the many peppers on Din’s plate into his mouth. “You’re gonna regret that, Kid.”

He whipped around, eyes wide and teary, already panting around his mouth full of contraband jalapeños... and didn’t spit out. Just gulped it down, stared at Din, then at Din’s plate, and began to reach for another pepper.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Din said, hurrying across the room and grabbing the back of the Kid’s shirt with his *very quickly* free hand. There was

milk on his wrist and table, but the Kid was safely pulled away. “I don’t know if that’s good for you, Kid. You were surprised by pizza, who knows what they fed you in there. One’s enough for now.”

The Kid whined and squirmed a bit, but let Din sit him back on his butt.

“Eat the Eggos.”

Din barely managed to stifle a chuckle at the sulky frown on the Kid’s face as he stuffed an egg-covered waffle into his mouth. It didn’t take long for the Eggos and churresco to work their magic, and the Kid licked his plate clean in moments. Literally. Licking. Din sighed and left him at it. More table manners later, when he wasn’t staring down the barrel of a military conspiracy and a very, very long day. He pushed his plate over to let the Kid finish off the last of his eggs and green beans, eyeing him carefully as he gulped down the slightly spicier few bites. When the Kid just licked at his fingers before reaching for the milk, Din reached into his pocket once more, waiting until the Kid safely put the cup down to show him the paper bracelet.

He’d never seen a kid go from content and almost sleepy to wide-eyed and terrified quite so fast. For himself, he felt as bad as he had when watching Luke close the office door, blue eyes red-rimmed and *sad*. Those big brown eyes, the pupils barely pinpricks, stared up at Din with almost mirroring betrayal as the blue eyes he saw yesterday. Carefully, Din set the bracelet down and left his hands relaxed and flat on the table top. Clearly in sight.

“You’re not going back.”

The Kid twitched, a full body shudder that looked downright painful, but he kept his dilated eyes on Din’s face. Color slowly returned to his blanched features, the stone mask a child his age shouldn’t be able to make slipping.

“Unless... do you want to—”

Before Din could even finish, the Kid was shaking his head furiously. Small *eheheheh* sounds rattled out his mouth, terror in every movement of his hands, quiver of his lip, darting of his wide, wide

eyes.

“Then, you’re not going back. You’re stuck with me, I guess. Hope that’s okay?” His lips curved up awkwardly on the side at the Kid began to nod vigorously, his brain all but rattling. Din finally reached for the bracelet and set his index finger on the bold black ‘11’. “That you, Kid? Are you... 11?”

The Kid inhaled sharply, lips quivering harder as his brown eyes shined. Slowly, the Kid reached to the plaid sleeve on his arm and pulled it up, struggling far more than the loose and soft cotton deserved. The night before Din had showed the Kid how to use the shower, showed him the hot and cold, tested the temperature to make sure the Kid wouldn’t burn himself, and left him to bathe and dry off on his own while Din waited down the hall, ears perked for any loud cries or thuds. While the Kid was no *toddler*, he wasn’t very big, nor was he quite Winta’s age. Fortunately, shower time had ended without a hitch (other than the Kid taking much too short a time and Din forcing him to go back in and use the *soap*) and Din had been able to take a mostly hot shower of his own before throwing in laundry.

However, because he had let the Kid shower alone and dry off, Din hadn’t looked him over too closely. He had noted a lack of bruises, and the only scrapes had been so superficial they didn’t even need band-aids except for the ones on his feet. So the tiny tattoo on the smooth skin of the Kid’s inner arm was a shock. The ‘11’ was startlingly black against the dark brown skin and old. It had been there *years*.

Carefully, Din wrapped a hand around the Kid’s tiny, bird-like wrist and brought his arm closer.

“Was this always there?”

The Kid nodded once, bottom lip wobbling, and lifted a hand to tap his chest between his collarbones.

Din exhaled sharply. He quickly controlled his reaction and nodded back.

“You. You’re Eleven.”

The Kid whimpered and yanked out of Din’s grasp, tucking it against his chest defensively. He curled around his arm, his other hand clutching his wrist, tears filming his lashes, falling down his cheeks when his eyes closed on a shaky breath.

“I’m not sure I like it. Doesn’t suit you.”

The Kid blinked rapidly and stared up at him. Din smirked, the motion hesitant and a little too crooked.

“You don’t look like an eleven to me. Just... uh, Kid. Would you like a name? We can get you a name later?”

There was a long moment of silence, the Kid gawking with his lips parted and his chest heaving off-rhythm and shallow. Din shifted in his seat, regretting the words and wondering if maybe he should’ve *offered* a name, when, like the winter sun rising over the foggy grey horizon, a slow, face-splitting, shining smile unfurled over the Kid’s face. His eyes wrinkled at the edges and his nose crinkled, and his missing tooth was a stark gap in his sunny smile.

Helplessly, Din chuckled. “It’s a plan, then.”

The Kid preened, a happy—if Din could allow himself to assume—*brr* escaping his throat again. Gently, Din took back the Kid’s arm, rolled the sleeve back down, and buttoned the cuff. The Kid watched silently with gleaming eyes and a curious chuffing sound in his throat.

“We’ll get you clothes that fit... um, soon. I hope.”

The Kid snickered, nose crinkling again.

“I’m gonna have a long day at work, so I’m taking you somewhere safe. To someone I really trust. He’s gonna take good care of you. He might even have some better clothes,” Din said seriously, leaning down a bit to meet the Kid’s eyes. The Kid scowled and wrapped both arms around the spoke of the back of the chair. “No, you can’t stay here, either. What I... I’m planning something that could get the wrong people angry. You can’t be here alone.” The Kid’s barely there



eyebrows rose high, then scrunched close into a concerned frown. He reached for Din, fingers grabbing at his wrinkled sleep shirt. Din shook his head and gently pushed the Kid's hands away. "No, you can't come with me."

The Kid scowled darkly "No." And made to grab at Din again. Din could feel something invisible and impossibly heavy push him forward, right into the Kid's tight grip on his cotton tee.

Din grunted, one hand on the table, the other on the back of the chair. When the weight on his back disappeared, Din slowly and carefully extracted the Kid's fingers from his shirt, ignoring the irritated and protesting grumbles.

"Don't use that on me, Kid. I can't use it back, can I?" But his heart was beating wildly because the Kid *spoke*. He'd said *no*.

The Kid huffed and looked away.

"You're going to my friend's, you're gonna listen to what he says, and you're going to *stay safe*, do you hear me? I don't care what mind powers you got in there," Din said with a wiggle of his fingers near his temple, which made the Kid stare flatly at him, obviously unimpressed. "I'm not gonna let them take you back, Kid, so you gotta work with me here. I'm keeping you safe."

Dark eyes darted over Din's face, and his expression pinched and pursed so much like a little old man's Din barely kept from laughing, but, in the end, the Kid huffed and nodded. He fell back against the chair, crossed his skinny arms swimming Din's old clothes over his chest, and grunted angrily.

"Yeah, yeah. It sucks, I hear ya. We'll head out in a minute. Get whatever you want to bring. And don't use any of that brain stuff," Din warned, pointing a finger at the Kid as he got to his feet.

The Kid glared at him, then stuck out his tongue before promptly bursting into strangely thin and high-pitched giggles behind his hands as he stared up at Din. Din rolled his eyes and made his way down the hall, trying not to smile, as, after a short moment, feet pattered around his living room.

Din dressed quickly in thankfully clean—if un-ironed—khakis, gathering everything he needed for the day, plus a few extra clothes and a blanket for the Kid. As he passed the dining table, he caught sight of the paper bracelet and quickly slipped it back into his pocket. The Kid was waiting in the living room, balanced on one leg and scratching his shin with the other foot's toes. His head cocked to the side, eyes closed, looking like the weirdest cousin of a flamingo Din had ever seen. He was clutching his drawing pad, box of crayons, and a box of Eggos (despite there being maybe two left in there). Din tucked the spare shirt and shorts into the Kid's arms. The Kid blinked, and Din swung the blanket over him and wrapped him up like a burrito, his eyes glittering from the small hole Din left open around his face.

"I'm gonna carry you around like you're just some blankets, don't go squirming around."

The Kid shook his head, grinning from the depths of his blanket.

Din swung him up into a fireman carry with a small grunt and a muffled but excited shriek near his ear, pausing to grab the file box from the floor by a handle-hole on his way out. His heart was beating too fast, his eyes darting around his property from behind his sunglasses. There was no one out there, only the sound of early birds and the sight of drifting fog among the trees, but the hair on the back of his neck stood up. The door of his Blazer creaked open and he tossed the bundle of blanket and child with forced nonchalance onto the bench-seat inside, breathing a sigh of relief at the muffled giggle.

"Stay down, Kid," he muttered as he slid the box along floor and swung in after.

He rumbled up the drive towards the road, glancing in the rearview mirror. There was nothing out place, not a single suspicious shadow in the woods, but it took all his willpower not to bear down his weight on the accelerator. Maybe it was just the contraband kid next to him, who had wriggled out of his comfortable prison to stare out the windows with wide eyes and gaping mouth. He hadn't even sat up, but the sight of the treetops and the winter iron-grey sky was enough to bowl the Kid into awed silence.

It wasn't far to their destination, but Din's palms were sweaty by the time he turned off the road and down another gravelled drive. Unlike Din's, which was heavily pitted and hell on even his Blazer's shocks, this drive was level and smooth; the pebbles popping up under his tires and pinging the sides of his vehicle had been bought and paid for to keep the drive safer. The Kid flinched and grumbled at the crunching and pinging until he ducked back under the blanket, rolling himself up tight and covering his ears.

The house that waited where the treeline broke was homey and well-worn in that loved and cared for way. It wasn't quite a log cabin, but not much different. The walls were dark wood, the roof tin and painted forest green. Actual linen curtains hung in the windows and a rocking chair sat out on a porch only three steps off the ground. There was already a thin tendril of smoke wisping its way out of the tin funnel of a chimney, which wasn't too surprising. The owner never liked Hawkins' winters, despite living here most his life.

As Din braked the Chevy and unbuckled, the front door opened and Karga stepped out, the surprise evident on his face despite the wide, welcoming grin. Din swung out of his door with a quiet 'wait here' to the Kid, and Karga was coming down the porch steps with arms open.

"If it isn't the new sheriff here to say good morning to the old," Karga greeted, half-laughing, giving Din an easy and affectionate hug and solid few slaps on his back. Din huffed and returned the gesture, the familiar scents of tobacco, wood smoke, and coffee in his nose from Karga's worn-in linen shirt.

"Hey, Greef. It's been a while," Din said quietly. Karga made a sharp motion, dismissing Din's guilt without hesitation.

"Think nothing of it, Din. I know how busy you are, here, stand back and let me get a good look at you," Karga demanded, stepping back himself and cupping Din's jaw in one large, warm, and heavily callused hand. With a fond and sad smile, Karga patted Din's cheek and gripped the back of his neck— reminding Din suddenly how he reassured the Kid with similar gestures over the past few days. "Kuiil was a good man, and a good friend to us both. How are you, my boy?"

“Fine.” Din grunted, one shoulder shrugging. Karga’s dark eyes narrowed, not fooled a minute. “I’m in my forties now. You really gotta stop calling me boy, Greef.”

“Never,” Greef said with a soft chuckle. “You wouldn’t tell Arma to stop calling you mijo, would you?” The brief look of horror that crossed Din’s face had Karga laughing a little more freely and loudly with another back-slapping hug. “So let this old man remember your youth without backtalk. You gonna tell me why you’re here so early if you’re not here about Kuiil?”

Din frowned, cutting a glance towards the Chevy. “I wouldn’t say it’s... *not* about Kuiil. Exactly.”

Karga glanced from Din, to the Chevy, and back, confusion pushing his bushy grey eyebrows high up his forehead. “It’s not like you to beat around the bush, Din. What’s going on? Is this about the funeral arrangements? I figured that old hermit would only trust you with that.”

“Yeah... no, I’ll get that all done. It’s not that.” Din took off his hat, which was already askew from Karga’s familiar embraces, and dragged a hand through his wild fluff of hair. “It’s a lot to explain.”

A door creaked open. A *Chevy SUV* door. Din turned around to see two skinny legs in jean shorts almost long enough to be pants fall to the gravel drive, hands clutching the door. The Kid, with his too-big eyes, bigger ears, and shorn head, peered around the door. Karga, after a long silent moment, let out a thin whistle.

“Well, shit, boy. What have you done?”

Din groaned and buried his face in his hand.

After declining to sit— but gratefully accepting the fresh mug of coffee— Din leaned against Karga’s kitchen doorway and watched the Kid humming and grunting quietly to himself, legs swinging over the side of the dining table chair, crayon flying over paper. More black. He gulped the last of the coffee and handed the mug over to the

gobsmacked Karga.

“Really. *Really*. This is the kid? The one Kuiil called Omera out for?”

“Really.” Din pinched the bridge of his nose, high up near the corner of his eyes. “No name. And some sorta connection to the lab. He’s gotta be kept secret, Karga, and I can’t trust him alone in my house all day again. I can’t be worried about him while... while doing what I gotta do today. There’s a good chance I’m going to be pissing off some people and... It felt *off* this morning, Greef. Maybe it’s too much going on, but I think my house is being watched.”

“Anyone would be feeling a bit paranoid after finding a runaway from a *military run lab*, son,” Karga hissed under his breath. “He... he’s *special* you said?”

“Yeah. Take it easy and don’t startle him, just... just trust me. Keep it quiet and calm,” Din said vaguely. It seemed enough for Karga, though, who nodded seriously with a barely discernible swallow. He looked over suddenly, his suffer-no-fool’s squint back on his face.

“You’re not thinking about going head-to-head with that damn lab, are you? I told you Skywalker was a bad influence on you,” he said with a headshake.

“Don’t... not now, Greef,” Din said quietly. Karga’s expression softened into concern.

“Had a falling out, Din?”

“Not so much, but close enough. That damn lab,” he muttered. He straightened and walked towards the table, ignoring Karga’s opening mouth. Din wasn’t in the mood for trite condolences right now. He knelt next to the Kid, whom looked up from his drawing pad and gazed steadily at Din. “I’m heading out. You be good for Greef. He was a sheriff like me, a long time ago-”

“Not *that* long ago,” Karga protested faintly.

“-so he’ll keep you safe. You promise to be good?” Din asked. The Kid stared and, without a word, held out his loosely curled fist, pinkie extended. Din smiled crookedly, chest warmer than natural, and

easily returned the gesture. “That’s right, pinkie promise.”

He got up, feeling the weight of that dark glittering gaze as surely as the power the Kid used. He cleared his throat, slapping his hat back over his hair and ignoring that knowing look on Karga’s face. He appreciated the lack of further conversation, accepting the brief squeeze of Karga’s hand to his shoulder before he passed out the front door.

He knew, logically, the Kid was safe here. There hadn’t been anyone following him, there hadn’t been anyone outside his house, and Karga was barely on anyone’s official radar these days. He had retired peaceably and without a qualm, stepping back to let Din take his place when Din had blown back into town while barely holding himself together after the crash of his marriage and career. Karga wasn’t quite a father figure, but he had been a solid and foundational presence in Din’s life since he’d been a screw-up teen. He’d always looked at Din with warm trusting eyes whenever Din had somehow managed to get into trouble, bruises on his face and knuckles from whatever fight he’d been in. Somehow, he had never really disappointed Karga, and he eventually decided to get a double Associate’s in criminal justice and social work because of Karga and his foster-mother’s influence on him.

But still, Din hesitated when he got behind the steering wheel. Stared at the front of that familiar house— a *home*— and felt a buzz of trepidation under his breastbone. With a low, annoyed grunt, Din threw the gear into reverse and revved down the drive. He would be showing up to work more than an hour early, but, with everything going on, he didn’t think anyone would mind.

Like Monday, Hawkins’ downtown area was flooded with the usual traffic. A few of the older generation were huddled close and talking, their nods at his Blazer as it rattled past grave and serious. But schoolkids were laughing and joshing around, nudging shoulders, chasing each other down sidewalks, ringing their bike bells as they ignored traffic and pedestrians alike. Adults were coasting over the speed limit, a few of them obviously slowing down as he rumbled up Main Street, all heading to their 8 or 9 to 5’s, the bankers, the retail and office workers, and out of town commuters, even a few trucks heading out to the old Sattler quarry.

He idled at the only red light in downtown on Main and Third. To the left, the sheriff's department, and further down, the Mayor's and other municipal buildings. His blinker binged, and his teeth gritted, creaking painfully, before he glanced out the rearview, saw the oncoming 'traffic', and abruptly switched off his turn signal, and revved straight through the green light. There was a surprised honk that ended quickly, and Din sped down Main and out of downtown. And then farther and farther out.

This side of Hawkins was much like his own side. Lots of trees and acres of space between each neighbor. *Unlike* eastside, the homes and properties were a bit better taken care of. They were old family homes, with strong fences and small livestock and chicken coops. The vehicles were usually bigger, newer, and almost everyone had a boat or a horse trailer parked in their nicely painted garages. He caught sight of a brick stile with a cast iron mailbox with a rooster vane like one from the top of a barn. It was painted red and green, though the paint was decades old and flaking off, the weird smile on the rooster's face barely discernible. The drive up to the house was smooth and gravelled, but the gravel had been laid years and years ago, barely rustling under the Blazer's tires.

The house among the trees was a two-storey building, although he knew the entrance to a cellar underneath was around the right side of the house. It was a weathered, old, white building with faded tan trim and slate shingles he himself helped replace last year. The front steps sagged, there was a loose board (or three) on the wide veranda, and a wooden porch swing just wide enough for two. The muslin-and-lace curtains were faded but clean, and potted plants hung from hooks along the edge of the porch roof, most of them deadish and grey this late in the season. The barn off to the side had been gutted and renovated as a garage where a boat barely better than a canoe sat in between wide open double-doors, partially blocked from sight by the rusted and falling apart station wagon. One of a small herd of goats was peeking around the corner of the back acre, its long grey beard trembling as it chewed placidly and stuck its bony jaw through the slats of the fence.

He shoved the gear into park, tightened his hands around the wheel

with a small sigh, and swung himself out the door. He landed with a light thud to the dusty drive. Immediately, the wild clucking of the hens met his ears, and he looked over to see the flash of their grey and black spotted feathers flapping around the corner. *Worse than dogs*, he thought—as he always did.

The front door was silent, but the outside screen wasn't, always creaking no matter how much WD-40 he forced into Luke's cabinets to use on the hinges. The creak cut through the air, drowning out the flock's annoying screeching, and he looked up through the blessed layer of his shades to see Luke in the doorway, face the worst kind of impassive. It was still better than outright scowling, but not much. Din stumbled up the sagging porch steps, the wildly reaching arms of whatever plant in the nearest pot brushing the wide brim of his hat. With a jerk of his arm, he pulled off his hat and tossed it onto the haphazardly-tipping table by the door. Luke had helped his nephew Ben try to make that by hand a few summers ago, and it looked it.

*Ben was better than me at the whole woodworking thing,  
but, you know, I'm not exactly handy.*

*That is not funny, Skywalker.*

*That was hilarious. I'm a comedian. C'mon, laugh.*

"Hey," Din forced out.

Luke's eyebrows rose, disappearing under the blond bangs that hung flat and lank over his forehead. Din frowned, glancing Luke over with concern. *Everything* about Luke seemed flat and lank. While Luke usually wore clothes from the bottom of a Goodwill bin, or worse, he never looked like *he* came from the bottom of the bin, too. Luke was always the Golden Boy wrapped in ill-fitting hippie clothes, everything faded and old and ragged, but his eyes always too blue and his hair fluffy and gold, his grins lighting up the space around him and making Din feel lighter in turn. Even when he'd woken them both up screaming in the middle of the night, by the time the sun got up, *Luke* was up. The night was over, and Luke Skywalker's switch



was flipped.

Today... that switch was very much not flipped.

“Luke?”

He held up a hand and that impenetrable gaze broke when Luke shook his head and attempted a smile. “Coffee?”

Din peered closely at Luke’s hand, scowling harder when he saw the barely visible shaking. “Tea.”

“Worrywart,” Luke muttered, rolling his eyes with a huff. Despite the teasing at his expense, tension uncoiled from Din’s shoulders at the much more natural smile on Luke’s face. “Come in.”

Din followed him inside, catching the screen door before it slammed shut and tucking his sunglasses into his pocket. The house was exactly the same as always at first glance. Old frames, wooden and tacky gold plastic with old black and white photos of the Lars family, and a few of Luke’s old life— him and his football buddies in their uniforms, Luke in his high school graduation robes, in his freshly ironed fatigues standing between his grey-haired aunt and uncle— hung over ancient wallpaper so faded the flowers looked vaguely like sunbleached watercolor splotches. The old hutch was still overflowing with tattered paperbacks and too many vinyls. There was a single cardboard box filled to the brim and then some with cassettes and 8-tracks set on the ground between the hutch and a stereo and record player. Instead of a couch there was a single armchair that couldn’t even recline and the seat sagging inward, and a mismatched collection of cushions and futons around the coffee table. A large white cage stood across the living room near a window, filled with wooden perches and hanging toys and a large mirror. A large white cockatoo with a yellow crest fluffed up turned its head to give him the most judgemental up-down stare Din had ever received.

Din’s lip curled at the bird, which only fluffed up bigger, squawking, and Din jerked around at Luke’s quiet snickers. The coffee table, the dining table, the counters in the kitchen Din saw when he followed Luke further in were *covered* in papers, in plates and bowls full of half-eaten food, empty glasses and mugs, too many of them with

coffee stains ringed around the inside. Even stranger, one of Luke's most expensive prosthetics was all but gutted on the dining table, his expensive and hard to replace tools and parts laid out over newspapers.

Luke never let his house get this messy. There weren't any piles of trash, there wasn't a gross smell, but just the tools and prosthetic left out and gutted where Artoo could get out them, or fur could get in, was exceedingly odd. Combined with the rest of the mess, it spelled trouble.

Speaking of which, there was a loud yowl-like meow and he glanced down to see the giant grey-and-white fluffy *thing* Luke called a cat. He bumped his head, then his whole body against Din's leg so hard he almost lost balance.

"You better give him attention or he'll never forgive you."

"I'm in my work uniform," Din argued. Luke snorted and shook his head, the kettle already set on the hob to boil as he took down mugs and the tea tin. Artoo threw himself against Din's legs again with a louder yowl and Din sighed and crouched down to pat the cat's head.

Who, as usual, was *immediately* offended at Din's audacity and left him behind with a flick of a fluffy tail. He leapt from the ground to the counter, yowling again when Luke absently swiped him back onto the ground, and then took off in high-affront for, probably, Luke's laundry to scatter across the house. Din brushed off his pants and stood.

"I wasn't expecting you to show up so soon. Especially with... everything," Luke noted after a long, awkward moment of silence.

"Leia came by yesterday."

"Ah," Luke glanced towards the ceiling in exasperation. "Of course she did." He looked back to Din over his shoulder. "Sorry about that."

Din shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. "No, she was right."

"And how, exactly, did she put the unasked for and right opinion?"

Luke asked, mouth twitching.

“Something along the lines about forcing us into a small room to act like big boys. And that she’s *always* right.”

Luke burst into laughter, his whole body shaking with it. He rubbed at his eyes with his forearm and heaved a sigh as the laughter tapered off. Another long silent minute, Luke poured water into cups to steep the teabags, and, despite Din’s order for tea, started up his coffee machine. He frowned, but cleared his expression when Luke handed him a mug. It was obviously Beru Lars’ old set, the porcelain delicately painted with gold filigree and clusters of pink flowers and blue ribbons.

“I’m sorry.”

Din frowned at the darkening tea in his cup and wondered how his words came out of Luke’s mouth. He glanced up and saw Luke’s awkward grimace, his bloodshot blue eyes staring out the kitchen window. As if the frolicking fat goats were the ones that needed his apology. Which, compared to Din, probably deserved it more. He could feel his eyebrow rising.

“If I remember it correctly, I was the one who went too far.”

“Oh, you did. You were definitely out of line,” Luke agreed, grinning. With his face turned away and his profile in bright relief, Din could see the beginning of his beard growing scraggly and fair along his jaw. Also worrisome. Luke only didn’t shave if he didn’t trust his hand to stay steady. “But I was out of line, too, and I didn’t even... I’m supposed to be your friend, Din. You’re definitely my best friend, well, maybe after Leia.”

“Acceptable. As long as I’m higher up than Han.”

Luke barked a laugh and he finally met Din’s eyes, still smiling when he saw Din’s smirk. His expression fell into something softer, guiltier, and now Din wanted to look away.

“I’m supposed to be your friend,” he repeated, “and I was so caught up in the lab, in Rose and that missing kid, I forgot something pretty

kriffing important. Kuiil was your friend, too, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I rode you so hard, and I'm so sorry that he's dead, Din. That you have to deal with... all of that. I'm *sorry*."

Din blinked, and then kept blinking rapidly at the stinging heaviness suddenly there. Luke made a soft sound, set aside his teacup, and wrapped his arms around him, one over Din's shoulder and another under his arm. Din woodenly returned the embrace, then grabbed at the back of his shirt, fingers clutching desperately with his one free hand, tea splashing over the back of the other. It was fucking *hot*, but he just hissed and collapsed against Luke's smaller frame, his head thudding to Luke's shoulder.

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"Everyone keeps saying *sorry*," Din whispered, voice muffled by the cotton shirt under his face. Luke's hand spasmed against the middle of Din's upper back, but he didn't move away. Not with Din's arms getting tighter to hold him in place. "But he's still dead."

"Yeah."

"And Rook, shit. There's not even a *body*, do you know what his parents looked like when I told them... I told them there was nothing for them to bury?"

"*Hell*, Din."

Luke squeezed so tight Din let out a huff of a breath. It sounded a bit thick and wet, more a sob than a scoff, but Luke gamely ignored it, reaching up to curl around the back of his neck, palm warm and fingers stroking along his hairline.

"I'm glad you came today. I would've... I was gonna come today, 'round lunch time, bribe you with food into feeling better, but I'm glad you came here."

"I wasn't gonna," Din muttered. Luke chuckled quietly, his thumb brushing behind Din's ear.

"Well then, I'm glad you followed those keen instincts leading you by your nose." Luke moved back, brushing Din's hat-flattened curls off his forehead, fingers lingering and his gaze steady on Din's. He suddenly shook himself and quickly patted at Din, very similar to how Din patted Artoo. "I'll still bring you lunch. You look rough around the edges.

"Look who's talking," Din muttered, carefully pulling his arms away and feeling a lot looser. He hadn't realized how tightly he had been wound until now. He rubbed at his eye with the heel of his palm as Luke obviously ducked away and reached for his tea. "I'm... I'm not gettin' lunch. I have to... a casket..."

"Oh. *Oh*, of course you're... I can help?" Luke offered, frowning.

"Greef... um, Greef offered," Luke nodded silently, but Din quickly added, "I told him no. I... I'd like you to be there."

Luke smiled, not quite his beaming smile, but it still made the room lighter. "Yeah, of course. It's been about ten years since Uncle Owen and... and Aunt Beru, but I remember the rigmarole of it. I'll be there."

"That's not why-

"I know," Luke interrupted with a shrug, "but it doesn't make it less true." The coffee machine gurgled loudly as the last of it dripped down into the urn. Luke gulped down his tea before moving back to that counter.

"I'm not gonna drop it," Din said after a bracing sip of his own tea. It had steeped so long that he grimaced at the bitterness while Luke's shoulders and back went taut. "Your house is a mess, you haven't showered since I saw you Monday, and I don't think you've slept since then, either."

"Trying to say I smell, Djarin?" Luke quipped lightly.

"Yeah. I am."

Luke turned around with a large thermos in his hand and a scowl on his face, pale cheeks burning red. "Not funny."

"I'm not laughing." Din choked the last of the tea down, set the cup aside, and took the wide step across the kitchen to stand next to Luke. "I *am* sorry for what I said, I never should have said it, especially not like that, but this?" He waved expansively to take in Luke's house, and then Luke himself, whom flinched and glared down at the open thermos. "This is *not* okay. Do you trust me?"

Luke flinched again, whipping his head to gape up the few inches into Din's serious gaze. "What?"

"Do you trust me to do my job or *not*, Luke?"

"What- of course, I do! I voted for you!"

"That's very nice, but I need more than a damn vote."

Luke scowled. "This is rich when you don't even trust *me*."

Din groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. He shook the annoyance off, knowing Luke was goading him again on purpose. "Luke, you were right. I *know* you were right, you know that I know you were right. I'm sorry for what I said, but I told you *already* that you were right."

Luke fidgeted. "You did say that."

"And I'm going to look into the damn lab. Today."

"What!?" Luke shouted, the thermos slamming down on lacquered wood. "You can't just go face to face with a *military lab*, Din! I should-"

"No, you *definitely should not*. This is my job. I have every right to go ask them, as a courtesy because two *children* are missing near their property, for a dime tour and maybe a look at their security tapes. They won't want me to get the Mayor, or worse, a federal judge involved with a warrant. So, you need to trust me to *do my damn job*."

Scowling and gnawing so hard on his bottom lip skin split, Luke slowly nodded. "Fine. Fine!" He raised both arms in surrender. "You're right. Blast it, but you're right."

“Have you been hanging with Han and the twins again?” Din asked suspiciously. Luke blinked and stared at him in surprise. He grinned a second later; the bloodshot eyes and barely bloody lip almost disappeared at the return of his brightness.

“Am I doing it again?”

“I’m pretty sure I heard you say *kriffing* earlier.”

Luke burst into laughter. “Blast it, I did.” He patted Din’s chest and then turned back to the thermos and coffee pot. “So, lunch hour? The usual time?”

“Yeah. I’ll be out and around town, so just meet at...” Din breathed heavily through his nose. “Baxter’s.”

With a glance from under his hair, Luke gave Din a reassuring smile and began to pour spoon after spoon of sugar into the thermos, shaking it lightly. “We’ll do what needs to be done and it’ll be okay. I promise.”

“Pinkie promise?” Din muttered despite himself. Luke snorted.

“Sure, once I have a free hand, I’ll do just that.”

“I have a condition.”

Luke frowned and squinted at him, a cinnamon stick in his hand. “A condition for a free hand? Are you working for the VA?”

“Ha. Funny.” Luke grinned. “No, for you helping me out today. *Sleep.*”

“Din-” Luke sighed, plopping in another stick of cinnamon.

“No. You listen up. You show up looking like... looking this,” Din waved expansively at Luke’s... everything, “and I’m sending you back home and I’m doing all the funeral arrangements on my own.”

“Let me get this right,” Luke put the cap on the thermos. Din automatically reached out to hold the thermos while Luke twisted the cap into place. “You’re holding hostage the *offer* of my help? Really?”

“Yes. Because you know how... how much Kuiil...” Din broke off and cleared his throat. “I know you want to help, and I want you there, but not if it’s one more thing that’s gonna run you ragged. I’m looking into the lab today, and I’m *allowing* you to help me with Kuiil. So you need to take a *kriffing* nap.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Luke.”

“You can’t just *tell* me to go to bed, like my *dad*.”

“*Luke*.”

“Okay! Okay! Fine, I’ll sleep. *And* take a shower. I don’t need more remarks about my B.O.”

Din shrugged, an eyebrow rising over a slant of a smirk.

“*Ugh*.” But Luke was grinning as he pressed the overly-sugared and cinnamon-filled coffee into Din’s hands. Because of course Luke knew how Din really liked his coffee. “Get out of my house or I’ll sic Artoo on your pants again.”

“The horror,” Din said dryly, letting Luke shove at his back.

As they tromped through the messy den, Threepio let out another irritated squawk, all his white feathers fluffing up in affront at their undignified and loud noises. Of course, Luke apologized to the *bird*. They stepped onto the porch, Din sighing as a loose board squeaked under his boot when he reached over for his hat. Luke leaned back against the door, smirking crookedly.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get around to fixing it,” Luke assured him. And not meaning a word of it. His smirk slid away and he reached out, wrapping his hand around Din’s lower arm. “Hey, don’t be dumb at the lab, okay?”

“When am I dumb?” Din asked.

“When you think it’ll get things done faster,” Luke pointed out. Din’s mouth wrenched open, then closed, and he looked away.



“... small talk is a waste of time,” he muttered irritably.

“Exactly,” Luke agreed with a chuckle. He shook Din’s arm a little. “I mean it. Those people, they’re gonna be slimy, and say a whole lot of nothings that sound like somethings. If you make them think you’re a threat, they’ll be on your ass before you can blink.”

“I get it.”

Luke grinned and Din smiled back awkwardly. He couldn’t help remembering the Kid at Greef’s, the business card in his wallet, the long talk with Leia and her fervent pleading. He had just asked Luke to be there for him today, to pick out a fucking *casket* for Kuiil, and he was keeping this huge secret, letting Luke grin at him like everything had been wiped clean. His lips pulled tight, his jaw tensed, but as he formed the words in his head, Luke’s eyes closed and he turned half away to yawn hugely behind his elbow. He patted Din’s arm absently.

“See you later, sheriff.” Luke slunk back into his house, yawning again and waving behind him.

Din stepped forward, mouth opening slightly, but the door was already closed. Din frowned, slapped his hat against his thigh, then shoved it on his head and spun away. He spent the entire drive with his mouth a thin, white line and his eyes narrowed behind his sunglasses. When his truck pulled into the parking space in front of the department, Cara was outside, leaning against her cruiser. Din reached over and rolled down the window.

“You’re almost late,” Cara said, glaring at him over her sunglasses.

Din huffed. “Almost. Let’s go.”

“Go? Go where?” Cara asked, already moving towards his Chevy.

“Research. You’re cleared, right?” Din asked as she swung in. She slammed the door shut and gave him a very pointed look.

“You better hope so because I’m already here.”

“I can kick you out and get Erso.”

Cara smirked, showing all her teeth, looking more threatening than amused. “Try it, Sheriff. If I don’t get out of here and do *something*, I’m going to go insane and the department shrink just said I *wasn’t* insane.”

He nodded once and gunned it right back out of the lot since he’d already called it in on his radio to Iggy. Cara reached over to snatch his thermos, pouring herself a cap full. She took a single sip, spluttered, and stared over at him, wrist rubbing at her mouth.

“Did you fill this with *candy*?” Din took the small cap-mug out of her hand without a word. “Fine, *fine*. Don’t insult the coffee.” She threw up her hands in surrender. Din hummed wordlessly and took an extra big gulp. And ignored the gagging sounds.

Hawkins Lab was a low, squat building, maybe two stories high and made entirely of brick. The windows were short and long, but none of them quite wall to wall, and almost every single one of them was shuttered closed with too-clean white blinds. Even from their vantage point, the peak of a hill before trumbling down to the gatehouse, Din caught sight of maybe *one* office with a fully open window and the shadow of a person pacing back and forth. The parking lot was curiously empty, or, at the very least, emptier than the first day of the search party. The Blazer creaked to a stop at the gatehouse, the engine idling, as he rolled down the window and met the guard’s eye.

“Sorry, Sheriff, this place isn’t open to the public,” the guard said, genuinely apologetic, and before Din could even get a word out.

“Well, at least he knows who you are,” Cara muttered.

“Look, I know it’s a government building and military whatever, but... is your name Taft?” Din said with a jerk of his chin towards the nametag.

“Uh, yeah, Essin Taft, but I can’t-”

“You live here, right?” The guard nodded and Din continued to speak

over him, “Yeah, I’ve seen you at Kuil’s.” The guard’s face pinched and he looked down at the clipboard in his hand. “You know exactly what’s going on in town. If I don’t tick every box, check under every blasted rock in the woods, then I’m not doing my job here. I gotta give the Mayor *something*, they’re talking a town-wide curfew, having patrol cars outside the schools to protect those kids.” Din lowered his sunglasses, quickly tossing them onto the dashboard above the steering wheel. “Do you know how many kids there are in Hawkins, Taft? What if the next dead body is one of those kids? What if that girl shows up dead outside your fence? You going to sleep well that night?”

The guard swiped a hand over the military-style crew cut of his short, black hair. “I can’t promise you anything. I just man the gate...”

“I get that. So how about you use that radio, call up who *can* let me in. Tell ‘em I just need a routine walk-through, maybe check out the security tapes along the fence near where the kids were last seen, *just in case*.” Din pointed towards the security cameras sitting atop the gatehouse like watching birds.

The guard glanced up, then looked down at the clipboard and nodded once. “A teenage girl and a little boy, right? I can’t imagine what their families are going through,” he murmured softly. “All right, hold on right here for a minute. I’ll see what I can do.” He motioned for Din to stay put before stepping back into the gatehouse and leaning his mouth over the radio on his shoulder.

“Hm, a softie. Good instinct,” Cara whispered, wincing her way through another cup of coffee.

“Kuil, uh... about a week ago... recommended this Taft kid get a job at the sheriff’s department, actually. Just got lucky it was his shift,” Din brushed off. Cara hummed dubiously, then gagged melodramatically over the last of her cup. “Stop drinking it.”

“Yeah, no. I haven’t been able to sleep more than a few hours the past few days. I need me my nectar of the gods, evil evil gods,” she said, pouring herself another cup. Din sighed loudly, staring upwards, more than grateful when, within a few moments, Taft waved them through with a name of their Chief Security and Lead Project

Manager to meet inside.

Chief Tarkin was an old, white-haired, very slender man with a face that belonged on a British villain— which Cara oh so helpfully pointed out while they walked up towards the front doors. Dr. Bonteri, however, was a younger Black woman with her long dreads tied back professionally and a welcoming, if subdued, smile on her face. While Tarkin barely remembered to hold out his hand to shake, Bonteri took his hand in both of hers, and did the same for Cara, making sure to ask their names and tell them what to expect on the guided tour. She kept up a pretty constant chatter, but none of it superfluous, answering Cara's questions without hesitation. Tarkin barely opened his withered, scowling mouth unless it was to tell them something was confidential or of particular pride to the lab or military.

Cara continued carrying the conversation, meanwhile Din observed without too much attention being drawn to his reticence. He had expected everything inside to be all hospital-ish and overly white, with people in labcoats rushing around or staring at clipboards. And while there were quite a bit of the latter, the interior looked more like boring office spaces than a hospital or lab. He picked up from Dr. Bonteri's explanations that most of the upper floors were, in fact, office spaces and conferences rooms, and that most of the labs were in the sublevels-

"Which are strictly for laboratory personnel and confidential," Tarkin interrupted firmly in the middle of Bonteri politely explaining the same thing.

Her steely grey eyes cut towards Tarkin, giving Din the impression of a woman *not* to be trifled with, before she smiled apologetically at Cara and motioned towards the security room. They passed a turn-off that had been sealed with plastic tarps and very formidable-looking warning signs, the edges air-sealed with caution tape.

"Is this a problem?" Din asked, coming to a complete stop and staring down the hallway. There were a handful of people in white biohazard suits, complete with gas masks and weird equipment in their hands. Two guards, also wearing the same biohazards suits but holding large, black M16 rifles, stood outside the sealed tarp. Din did his best

not to react to the sight of M16s in a *lab*.

“It’s not *your* problem, Sheriff,” Tarkin said smoothly. He crossed his hands behind his back and somehow managed to look down his nose at Din, despite being the shorter man. “There was a small incident in a sublevel dealing with some hazardous materials. Nothing too dangerous, but enough to take some precautions. Now come along and see the tapes before more of our time is wasted.”

Din glanced at Dr. Bonteri, eyebrow raising in question, but she could only shake her head minutely. “I’m leader of several teams and projects, but none in the biolabs. I’m an *mechanical* engineer.”

“So... things like...?” Cara pressed.

“Confidential,” Dr. Bonteri quipped, smirking. “But mostly medical innovations.”

“Like prosthetics?” Din asked. Cara smirked at him from out of Dr. Bonteri’s line of sight, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. Dr. Bonteri, however, was smiling at him as if she were a mother congratulating her exceptionally bright child.

“That’s right. There are quite a few similar projects, though, again, nothing I can describe in detail. It’s a relief, honestly. The doctors in the biolabs are here for very long hours, and I was nowhere near when whatever happened, happened,” she said with a nod towards the biohazard wall. “I’d hate to be quarantined away from my son and husband. They would wither away from boredom without me.”

“Life of the party?” Cara joked back. Dr. Bonteri smiled.

“Of course. My Finn is too sweet to do anything dangerous. He thinks sneaking out to see a punk concert in Indianapolis is the height of drama, and Lux, my husband, is too busy saving kittens on the street.”

“Finn. That’s the new star shortstop on the baseball team?” Cara asked thoughtfully.

Dr. Bonteri raised her eyebrow. “Watch many high school sports?”

“Is there anything *else* to do in this town? You know of any other concerts, and are only children the attendees?”

Dr. Bonteri and Cara both laughed and swept into the security room, completely ignoring the look of irritation pinching Tarkin’s expression and his impatiently tapping finger on his arm. Din ducked his head to hide his grin and followed the two women inside.

About an hour of staring at tiny, grainy videos later, and all Din had to show for it was burning eyes and a pounding headache. Nothing had disturbed the fence in any direction the cameras pointed. The most exciting thing that happened was the tape sticking at around 3:30 the night of the disappearance, but it also skipped at sometime around 2 AM the next day, and 9 PM last night. Din sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair, glancing over to Cara to see her carefully blank frown and her arms crossed over her chest.

“There is nothing more to see here. Dr. Bonteri will see you back to the front entrance. I, however, have more important duties to attend to,” Tarkin said. His mouth pursed into a tight moue of distaste, glanced over them one more time, and then spun on his heel and left, boots clipping on tile.

Dr. Bonteri sighed and shook her head. “As he said, it’s time to go. There’s a lot going on right now and we’ve given you what we can.” But her eyes cut towards the two guards staring intently at the screen bank.

Cara and Din exchanged a look. As they followed Dr. Bonteri back down the corridors, her carefully polished small talk began to falter, fingers fidgeting with her laminated badge as she slowly sucked the corner of her lips into her mouth. She pushed open the door for them, not even noticing Din’s motion to do so, and stood outside on the pavement with her hands cupping her elbows. Cara and Din exchanged another look, Cara raising her eyebrows and gesturing with her head at Dr. Bonteri, and Din frowning at her. Cara rolled her eyes just as Dr. Bonteri sighed heavily, passing a hand over her forehead.

“You seem like you have something on your mind,” Cara prompted.

Dr. Bonteri scoffed lightly. “Yeah... yes, it’s.” She looked away and made a small *tsk* sound between her teeth. Din noticed her eyes rove over the parking lot and he turned to see, once again, the empty spaces. “It’s something odd. About our staff.”

“Staff?” Din repeated. The doctor frowned briefly.

“Yes, I come in early every day, usually one of the first people in the building other than the guards. One night, there was a large team that was scheduled to do overtime, at least half their crew would be here,” she said, voice lowering. “When I got in the next morning, their cars were still all out there and the biohazard wall was up.”

“What night was that?” Din asked. He closed his eyes at the date, Cara inhaling sharply. It was, of course, Sunday night.

“It gets a little odder. When I brought it up, how I was worried about them not being able to return home, that perhaps we should call in for a relief team or medical professionals to get them out of there, Dr. Gideon and Chief Tarkin told me they would handle it. Yesterday, all their vehicles were gone.”

“Dr. Gideon?”

Dr. Bonteri blinked in confusion until realization lit up her eyes. “Oh, right, he runs this place. Been here since they put down concrete for the foundation. He hired me, actually. Dr. M. Gideon.” Din made a mental note, carefully not reaching towards his pocket for a notebook. “I didn’t know them well, they weren’t in my department, but I knew their faces, their names. None of them came in today, either.”

“But if there was some sort of medical emergency, they could just be quarantining in another location? Maybe a safer one?” Cara offered leadingly.

“I thought so, too,” Dr. Bonteri agreed, forehead still creased, “but I couldn’t shake the weird feeling. So I checked the employee records and scheduling, just before you got here as it happens. All of the

scientists missing today, almost every single one that stayed overnight on Sunday, is on indefinite leave. No other details, not even redacted details. There should be more information there, but it's all... missing." Dr. Bonteri's arms tightened around her torso, tucking her fists out of sight as her light eyes narrowed.

"Well... that's something," Cara agreed, dropping her voice quietly as the door behind the doctor buzzed. A few lab-coated people walked out, stepping away to smoke, but Din couldn't help but notice how close they stood, and how they weren't talking.

"We have to head into town. More leads to track down," Din said pointedly.

"Oh, right, of course. Thank you for staying to chat. My son, his friend is that girl, Rose. I'm really worried about her, about my own kid, too. But I shouldn't be holding you up," Dr. Bonteri said quickly, smiling brightly and reaching forward to shake Din's hand. Her grip lingered as she gazed into his face, serious and flinty-eyed, before smiling brightly once more and shaking Cara's hand goodbye. "Good luck. We're all hoping for the best."

Din and Cara dipped their hats, turning away to the Blazer. Dr. Bonteri watched them go, hands cupping her elbows again. She turned to the two smokers and exchanged a few words too distant to hear, smile in place, before she headed back inside.

"She's definitely smart. What's a doctor doing living in a trailer park, that's what I wanna know," Cara muttered.

"No idea. Her husband is a councilman with Leia, too," Din grunted. He swung into a seat and, when Cara buckled in next to him, he handed over a piece of notebook paper folded into a small rectangle. "She's definitely smart."

"Shit, did she slip you this?" Cara asked, unfolding it while Din shifted into reverse and got them going. "Is this... these are car models and license plate numbers. Do you think?"

"They're what?" Din glanced at the sheet quickly. He turned back to the road, frowning grimly "Yeah, I do think. That's your job."



“Tracking ‘em down? You got it, boss. What about you?”

“Going to the library.”

Cara stared at him, barking a short laugh. “What?”

“Gotta look up a Dr. M. Gideon.”

“Nerd,” Cara teased. She tucked the note away as they slowed at the gate and waved a farewell to Taft.

The town library was a small building near the sheriff department and the post office. Everything inside was in shades of brown and tan, tall rotating shelves filled with tattered paperbacks set around the much larger, cheap wood shelves. There were a few tables dotted here and there with barely comfortable, wooden-backed chairs, and much more comfortable and worn-in armchairs set farther back. Din went straight to the front desk where the same elderly, white-haired woman from his childhood still stood, a pencil stuck in her hairbun and half-moon spectacles hanging from a chain. She glanced up and smiled fondly.

“It’s young Din Djarin. How’s your mother?” Jocasta asked warmly. She suddenly frowned and raised her eyebrow at the hat he wore.

Din swiped it off quickly and ran it around and around in his hands, his ears burning slightly. Jocasta smiled again and his shoulders slumped in relief.

“She’s fine. Uh, down in Texas visiting Brenna’s family.”

“Does she know about Kuiil, that poor man?” Jocasta asked with a small frown and her hands folding together. Din shook his head. “You have to tell her in time for the funeral, young man. You *are* in charge of the funeral?”

“Yeah, there’s only-” Din cleared his throat and looked away. “There’s only me. Luke, um, Skywalker, he’ll help me.”

“Oh good. Leia will take it in hand soon.” Jocasta leaned forward and set her small, warm hand on Din’s arm. “They’re good people and will take care of you. But you tell your mother. She’ll want to be here for you and for him.”

Din swallowed hard, blinking slightly, bobbing his head a bit. Jocasta smiled and squeezed his forearm gently.

“So why’d you come by? Is it to invite me-”

“No, I mean, yes, you’ll be... Work,” Din shook his head and cleared his throat again. “I need to look up any newspaper articles on the Hawkins Lab, and a man named M. Gideon? A doctor there.”

Jocasta’s lips pursed thoughtfully. “Yes, follow me. We have microfiche archives and I’ll show you how to use the equipment. I should have a good idea where to start. Fortunately, nothing much happens here, so the lab opening was a big deal. Mr. Solo covered it extensively. I think there’s an article about little Luke chaining himself to a tree in protest?”

Din snorted loudly, both at ‘little Luke’ and the mere idea of the protest. Jocasta’s eyes twinkled from behind her spectacles.

“As for this Dr. Gideon, the name doesn’t ring a bell, but there should be a trail of a sort to follow.” She showed him the catalog cabinets, where to get the microfiche rolls, how to use the viewers, and left him with another reassuring pat to his arm, a smile, and a generous invitation to ‘take your time’.

He was a sheriff and doing research, so it wasn’t as if he *needed* that invitation to take his time. But he felt a lot better about having it when hours later, he was still crouched over the viewer, mouth moving as he read the fuzzy newsprint, made fuzzier by his slight farsightedness. Information on the the building of the lab, Luke’s several attempts to stop construction, and many of the town council, led by Leia and... surprisingly a Lux Bonteri, trying to stop its initial approval, of the new (at the time) Mayor himself approving it instead, and the Mayor being there in person for the opening was easy enough to find. He could *feel* Han’s glee in each reporting of the ridiculous Skywalker-Organa family drama.

It was the article of the opening, where Mayor Skywalker was standing with a group of beaming scientists, that Din finally caught sight of M. Gideon's face. He looked almost kind, with a closed-mouth but fatherly smile, and round glasses that twinkled in the grainy, black-n-white photo. Getting his first name— plus having his face— led Din down a gradually increasing rabbit hole of just weird, and *weirder* science babble. He had to stop and use encyclopedias and dictionaries a few times, writing on his notepad when certain things caught his eye; drug trials, human volunteers, *expanding the mind*.

He paused and slowly, deliberately, dragged his pen underneath his hastily scrawled words. Din personally hadn't done much in the DCU, most of his years as a detective in armed robbery and homicide, with minimal overlap with the drug control unit. Other than the occasional pothead (some of whom Din knew personally) and an even rarer meth lab, Hawkins didn't really *have* any drug problems. So the effects of LSD and MDMA weren't something Din was familiar with. But he knew enough to realize that 'expanding the mind' was looking more and more like a fancy way of saying '*fucking with the mind*'.

The strangest branch off the rabbit hole was a series of lawsuits by a young woman named Teresa Ibanez. All the lawsuits were specifically suing Dr. Gideon for stealing her baby about six years back. Within about three years of the first article, the lawsuits settled quietly out of court, and seemingly disappeared with no follow-up article reporting the outcomes. The last quote by Ms. Ibanez, an unmarried Hispanic woman, was a demand that Dr. Gideon return her baby immediately and that the baby was in grave danger in Dr. Gideon's care.

A baby boy named Grogu Ibanez.

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The bell rang and all the chairs in the classroom scraped over tile. Students chattered, laughed, teased and joked, rushed out of the classroom as if it was a day like any other. Rey stayed at her seat, staring at her bare desk, hands curled into fists on top. She hated

them. Hated them *all*. These normal teenagers that moved around her like she didn't exist. That smiled and laughed like Rose had never existed, so her disappearance didn't *matter*. It was just one more commi missing. Not like it actually mattered what a communist actually was. It's what their parents said, what the radio went on and on and *on* about for years, even though the war was long done and reduced to a game of nuclear chicken with Russia. The Ticos never should've come to Hawkins to begin with to most of those people.

"Ms. Pal-

"Rey," Rey interrupted fiercely, blinking her burning eyes as she looked up. Ms. Unduli was gazing down at her with blue eyes so patient and concerned it made Rey look away swiftly, gnawing on her thumbnail.

"Ms. Rey," Ms. Unduli allowed. She sat in the desk chair in front of Rey, her long green dress tucked neatly under her knees, every movement precise and clean. Rey had always wondered how hard it would be to act like a woman like Ms. Unduli, so graceful and unflustered no matter how loud or rowdy or *annoying* all her students could be. Rey wondered if her mother had been like that... "I know how hard it is, what happened to Ms. Tico. I know the mystery is worse than anything else..."

Rey flinched and stared out the window across the room.

After a moment, "It's enough that you remember her, but you can't give up on your own life. It seems trivial now, but your schoolwork is important, your grades are, and the opportunities education can give you. Ms. Tico wouldn't want you to completely ignore those responsibilities waiting for her."

"She's not dead."

"Ms. Rey-

"You're not listening to me," Rey said flatly, finally meeting Ms. Unduli's eyes. Still so concerned and patient. "I'm not waiting for anything. I'm gonna find her, I'm just planning my next step. And those *opportunities* can go burn. Until I find Rose, poly fractions are

the last thing I care about.”

Ms. Unduli looked over Rey’s drawn and pale face. She laced her fingers together, placing her hands on her lap, and sat back slightly in her chair. While her eyes, brilliant and bright against the light brown of her skin, gazed into Rey’s, Rey glared back, fierce and defiant. A fleeting smile ticked her lips upwards before smoothing away.

“As is your choice, Ms. Rey, but I hope you keep my words in mind. There is a time to let go and to reconfigure your priorities. You have until the test next Friday to figure that out and get your late assignments to me. Let Mr. Bonteri know he has until then to edit the work he’s given. I know it’s not his best work, although I appreciate his efforts.”

Rey frowned, brows pulled together tightly, eyes following Ms. Unduli as the math teacher got to her feet with barely a wrinkle in her long, flowing skirt.

“That’s it?”

“For now.” That fleeting smile. Then, an equally fleeting frown. “I do hope your faith is not misplaced. Ms. Tico is a wonderful student with a bright future. I find myself believing more strongly she’ll return to us soon thanks to you, Ms. Rey. You remind me of someone I knew well a long while ago. A headstrong woman quite like yourself.”

Rey dropped her head, shoulders pulling up around her ears, while an itchy flush crawled down the back of her neck. “Thanks?”

“Go on to lunch. I’m sure lower temperatures do not improve the taste of whatever is on the menu.”

Rey grabbed her things, all but falling onto her face as she stumbled past the desks and out the door. She was halfway down the corridor when she realized Ms. Unduli had said a *joke*. A real joke! Or... as real a joke as that was. In the cafeteria, most of the students were already at their tables, the noise of their many conversations and laughter a wall of sound that almost bowled her over. At the jock

table, the two comforting faces of her friends were missing, and the smell of whatever was for lunch made her stomach roll. She abruptly turned on her heel and went outside. There were only a few places students could eat without being sent straight back to the cafeteria. She curled into her coat as the winter air whipped over the football field. The bleachers rattled under her steps when she made it up to the topmost bench where the two walls met and made a corner that protected sitters from the worst of the wind. As she had thought, Poe and Finn were already there.

“Not eating?” Finn asked, frowning.

Rey shrugged. Poe handed her half of his meat-stuffed sandwich and she took it without protest, rolling her eyes and struggling to swallow with her dry throat. He took out a second sandwich and Rey snorted, choking on Wonderbread and turkey.

“Well, what’s the new plan, fearless leader?” Poe asked, looking at Rey.

“What did you call me?” Rey asked, raising her eyebrow.

“We’re following you on this. You’re the one who got the phone call, who got Solo to help...” Poe listed off. “We can’t just leave it where we left it last night, either. She’s out there, right?”

“Yeah, she’s out there,” Finn agreed, reaching over to squeeze Rey’s knee. She smiled tremulously.

“I... I’m going to the general store after school, actually. I need a lot of batteries, too. Do you think they have a book on Morse code in the library?”

Finn and Poe stared at her. She scowled and shoved too much sandwich in her mouth. Around her mouthful, and ignoring the crumbs, she explained her idea. The boys glanced at each other, then Poe dug out some pudding cups, gave one to Rey and handed Finn the second.

“That’s... that’s a little *complicated*,” Finn pointed out. He took a bite of pudding and handed it back to Poe. Rey rolled her eyes and turned

to share a disgusted look with Rose... and froze. Eyes on the empty spot on the bench below.

“So what? It’s better than yes or noes the whole time.”

“But you don’t even know if *Rose* knows Morse code. You can’t be sure she can even see you, just hear you, um, right?” Poe asked while frowning uncomfortably.

“She’s in the AV Club,” Rey protested.

“She can put together radios, not *telegrams*,” Poe retorted.

Rey glowered at him. “*Telegraphs*.”

“Maybe you could use a Ouija Board? If she can play with the lights, maybe she can move the thingie?” Finn mused.

“Wait, wait. What if she can flash the light *at* the letters? You can use a lot of flashlights for each letter,” Poe suggested.

“But that’s a lot of flashlights and they’re pretty expensive, Poe. I don’t think Rey’ll have enough money for that,” Finn said carefully. Poe opened his mouth, probably to offer some of that money, but he stopped himself at Finn and Rey’s equally unimpressed looks.

“... maybe it can be a lot of *little* flashlights?”

“A lot of... little lights?” Rey repeated, eyes widening. The three of them exchanged matching looks with quiet ‘*oh*’s. They bent close together, Rey suddenly ravenous as she shovelled pudding in her mouth, smearing some on her lip, as they feverishly made out their plan, what time and where, until the bell rang.

There was something like hope in them as they hopped down the bleachers and tossed their trash away. They were halfway across the field when a small group of students came from around the back of the auditorium. The cloying, acrid scent of burning tobacco preceded them, Rey’s nose scrunching. They were all dressed in shades of black, red, and camouflage, heavy metal and punk rock band logos splashed across their chests. A few of them were similar to ones Rey owned, annoyingly. One girl near the back flicked a still cherry-red

cigarette to the ground, barely slowing down to grind it out on the pavement leading off the field. Tallest in the group, though it was hard to tell with the way he slouched, was Ben.

“How obvious would it be if we went around the front instead? Mr. Kloon wouldn’t care if we were a little late,” Rey said. She shoved her hands deep into her jacket pockets and squinted in distaste at the James-Dean-knockoff near the front, with his slicked back hair and his fake-torn-up leather jacket and his motorcycle boots that he didn’t even own a motorcycle to go with.

“Just ignore ‘em,” Finn said, bumping their shoulders together.

“Do you think we should tell Solo about our plan tonight? I think his tire iron is still in my car, too...” Poe muttered under his breath. Rey shrugged and looked over, startling when her eyes met Ben’s already staring at her.

Rey barely heard whatever Finn said next as the groups approached the entrance to the school building and she got a good look at Ben’s face. The dark circles under his eyes could give Rey’s a run for her money, the whites vividly bloodshot, his face almost grey. For a second, just one stupidly weak second, Rey felt a burst of empathy, a connection building a bridge between them. It was obvious to her how last night, and the freaky circumstances of Rose’s (not?) disappearance, was affecting him as much as it affected her. They were, all of them— Finn, Poe, Rey, Rose, *and* Ben— in this together now. For better or for worse. All part of this terrifying and incomprehensible *something*.

She tried a smile, a mere ticking upwards of her lips. Ben looked down at his shuffling feet, scowling.

Rey scoffed, rolling her eyes and trying not to feel stung. She moved to put Finn *and* Poe between her and the oncoming rebels with shitty causes. Then, she tugged at Poe, and therefore Finn, to walk faster.

“If he wanted it back, he shouldn’t’ve run off so fast,” Rey interrupted, not even knowing what Finn or Poe were talking about now. “We can be nice and include him some other time. Let’s go.”



“Okay, okay, we’re coming,” Poe laughed.

“I thought Mr. Klooon wouldn’t care if we were late,” Finn teased. Rey huffed.

“So the trailer park trash and the school’s biggest jock were out crying in the bleachers again?” the James-Dean-rip-off sneered.

“Was that supposed to be an insult? I *think* he was trying to insult me, but he does know that was just a fact, right?” Poe stage-whispered dramatically. “Should I tell him not *everyone* has to be a walking high school stereotype?”

“Fuck you, Damerson.”

“Dameron,” Poe corrected with a beaming grin. Rey and Finn exchanged matching smirks. Poe never could turn down the opportunity to start shit. Rey glanced at Ben, but he was still staring at his copper-toed boots. Typical. “I, of course, couldn’t be bothered learning any of your names.”

“Poe,” Finn sighed. He nudged at Poe’s shoulder. “Just go.”

“I’m sure all you meatheads couldn’t learn a name without them being written on your team’s jerseys,” Armie hissed as his friend’s mouth worked furiously.

“That was a good one. If I wasn’t wiping the floor with you in Chemistry, it might actually hurt,” Poe retorted smoothly. Armie flushed red.

“The only smart one in your group of trashy losers got nabbed. You don’t got a lotta time till finals to cheat off her,” the first guy finally seethed.

Rey, Poe, and Finn all straightened, eyes flashing in rage, but Poe managed to grab Rey when she stepped forward. A few of them snickered, but Ben’s head finally raised and his eyes were boring into the back of his friend’s head.

“It was probably just her own people, coming to take her back to her commi country where she belongs. Don’t know why the sheriff cares

so much about one more commi bitc-”

“*Shut up*, Tarkin,” Ben snarled. The trio stared at him, Poe’s knuckles gone white and his fingers pressing bruises into Rey’s bicep to hold her back. Tarkin jerked around, immediately cowering under Ben’s intensely burning scowl. “You can’t do shit but talk or else your granddad will take your precious car away. So shut your mouth or I’ll do it for you.”

Billy Tarkin’s face went pale, then crimson, and he shoved past all his friends, who were snickering at his back, walking into the school alone. The double doors slammed open and hadn’t quite slung shut, when Finn blurted,

“Uh, thanks?”

Ben’s blazing dark eyes snapped to Finn and he sneered. Rey’s back went up even as the words spat themselves out of his mouth,

“I don’t give a shit about you. I just want to get to class.”

“That’s *real* big of you, Solo,” Rey said, words dripping acid. “Tearing down your so-called friend *and* us trash alike? You’re a two-faced asshole, but at least you know what’s *really* important.”

“Think whatever you want,” Ben muttered. His eyes darted away, then back, eyes looking redder, his mouth twisting painfully. “At least I’m not the dyke going crazy at prank phone calls.”

Rey’s jaw dropped, the air whooshing out of her throat, the sound too ragged for a gasp, as the word ‘dyke’ bounced around her skull. She made an involuntary step forward, scarlet filming her vision, but Poe’s grip was so tight she hissed. A body moved past them and Ben was on the ground with a thud. Finn was standing over him, his fist raised and a *furious* scowl on his face. Ben stared up at him, sprawled on his back, eyes wide and shocked. Suddenly everyone was moving.

Two guys grabbed Finn and dragged him back, Poe let go of Rey to shove one guy off and punch another in the nose. Rey saw blood and the guy curl over with his hands over his nose, but she was already moving forward, grabbing Armie before he could hit Poe or Finn, and

shoving him into another person. Someone's knuckles grazed her cheek, her hair got caught in someone's jacket buttons, there was a loud slap and Finn shouted, and one girl jumped on Poe's back, and Rey rushed over to help, knowing Poe's damn chivalry would get him beat black and blue by the girl currently clobbering him.

There was a sharp whistle, and the shouting of loud adult voices, and everyone fell aside. The second girl pulled the girl Rey was trying to pry off, and Rey pinwheeled off balance as the two girls ran away. Someone grabbed Rey's shoulder, yanking her back. She spun around, elbow up, and she turned to see Ben's head jerk back as she clocked his chin.

"Let go!" Rey snapped. Ben swayed, hand tightening on her shoulder and the other hand gripping his own chin. She pulled herself away with a grunt, only to look over and see Mr. Fisto *and* Ms. Unduli charging around the building. "Shit."

"Yeah," Ben muttered, leaning over to spit. It wasn't all blood, but it was red enough that Rey winced.

"What in the *world* is going on here?" Mr. Fisto demanded. He glanced over at Ben, an eyebrow rising incredulously. "Really, Mr. Solo, you're in the middle of this?" Ben shrugged and adjusted his jaw again silently. "Oh *no* you don't," Mr. Fisto said quickly, grabbing Armie by the back of the shirt and dragging him back when he tried to make a run for it. Poe and Finn shuffled up, leaning on each other and looking shamefaced under the teachers' scrutiny.

Ms. Unduli turned to Rey, took in the puffiness rising on her cheek and the wild tangle of her hair without a single change of expression. "Ms. Rey, I think that conversation about priorities will be coming sooner than expected. It'll be with your guardian. We'll be having a conversation about proper behavior with *all* your guardians," she added, giving each of the captured students a withering look.

"That'll be including the friends that ran off. Kids. They realize this school has a couple hundred students total, right?" Mr. Fisto joked, grinning crookedly at Ms. Unduli. She shook her head and set her hand on Rey's shoulder, leading her towards the building.

## Notes for the Chapter:

For clarity/spoilers, Ben calls Rey a "dyke" to piss her off; Rey thinks about how the town didn't like the Ticos because they're "commis"; the death discussions are about funeral arrangements for Kuiil, which is mentioned by several characters (also a comment about Bodhi Rook).

Essin Taft is an OC I made with my friend for KOTOR1. I DO know the plot twist, and no, Taft is not secretly Revan, but I really liked the name I came up with and the design I settled on, so when I needed a nice and helpful security guard, I chose my BEAST of a Jedi Guardian (always choose Toughness Feat, my man is IMPOSSIBLE to kill LMFAO).

Part 2 is about... 40 or 50% done depending on how long the most important scene ends up being. We're finally seeing REAL Dinluke and it only gets better from here!! I hope Karga was a surprise!! 🤔 My beta was not surprised, rude!, but he's at the point where he ALSO wants to slam Din and Luke's faces together and shout "just KISS already", so I consider it a job well done. He's also rooting for R\*ylo and I'm like SIR, EXCUSE ME, THIS IS A ROSEREY FIC, SIR.

## 6. Wednesday Pt II

### Summary for the Chapter:

“You can come if you can keep your mouth shut,” Din interrupted, not sighing. He turned to Luke with an uncomfortable grimace. “I don’t know if-”

“Oh hell no,” Luke started heatedly.

The harsh and abrupt ringing of an unfamiliar phone was the only reason they stopped so soon. They turned to stare at Han, who was smirking, all teeth and amusement, at the two of them.

/

... she yanked the faucet off and rubbed her damp hands on her jeans. She glanced into the mirror, the splatters of water, the deathly pallor of her own face.

“Oh my god, Rose, I have to get you out of there,” she whispered, hoarse and dry from bile.

There was silence, and darkness, and the creeping cold feeling got colder, more tangible, and then-

### Notes for the Chapter:

The only real warnings are already in tags: scary monster stuff and teen angst, stranger things plot, oh, and vomiting. If that's something that squicks you out, look out for P L U T T, it's right after that. The chapter summary shows right where it ends.

Thanks to @aureutr on tumblr for coming in at the clutch to beta!

It was almost lunch by the time Din pulled up to Baxter’s Casket & Funeral Services after coming straight from the library. Every article even closely related to the lab and Gideon had been copied, and were

now piled haphazardly over the benchseat next to him. He quickly shuffled and stacked them, then folded them in half and shoved them into the pocket on the inside panel of his too large jacket. After a brief pause, he took out his holstered pistol, checked the safety, and put it into the glove box. It felt too... odd to take his piece into where he'd be buying a *casket*.

The air conditioner in Baxter's whined overhead despite it being the middle of winter. As if the very idea of comfort while choosing where your loved one's dead body was going to spend the next few decades rotting was unspeakable. Din inhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face and accidentally knocking his shades askew. He hung his shades from the topmost button on his khaki shirt and stared around helplessly at the options— too many options— of caskets around the room. He knew enough about wood to recognize most of them at a glance— pine, maple, oak...

"Din? Din, hey," said Luke's voice from somewhere far away. Din tensed when a hand fell on his elbow. It squeezed tightly, dragging him back into funeral home and away from the useless listing of woods in his head. He turned to see Luke standing there and a man in a simple, dark grey suit behind him. "You back here with us?"

Din shook his head, forcing himself to relax. "Yeah. I didn't see your car...?"

"Han dropped me off," Luke explained, smiling crookedly under a slowly creasing forehead. "Are you all right? You can take a little more time..." He gently patted Din's arm, making the older man realize with a start that Luke's hand was still *there*.

"I got it," Din said, huffing lightly.

He looked over at the other man, whom stepped forward to shake his hand and introduce himself officially. Din knew him adjacently, mostly through work, but never like this. Personally.

"Would you like me to take your coat, sir? There's a rack," Mr. Greene offered with a kind smile.

Din shoulders tensed, a sudden wave of goosebumps crawling down

his skin. The air conditioner overhead whined and cut off, a last pump of warm water ruffling the curls on the top of his head. He shook his head once, hands shoving deep in his coat pockets.

Luke backed away, but he kept his gaze steady on Din's profile as Mr. Greene led them around the showroom. He didn't give much input—it would've been odd for a comparison or recollection of what he bought for *his* family, so Din appreciated the lack of *that*— but he stayed close to Din's side. The casket was chosen, arrangements made for 'the deceased' to be picked up from the morgue, the funeral time set, even the stone and inscription were done; Din never faltering a whit until the very end.

"Excuse me, Mr- er, Sheriff Djarin, you didn't fill in this line on the inscription," Mr. Greene said quietly, pointing with his pen at the empty line under the dates and name. "You chose the personalized option, but it could be left blank, or simply with 'rest in peace', which is common, if you prefer."

"He isn't *resting*, he's *dead*," Din snapped. Rage came surging up from nowhere, swelling up his throat, wrapping around his Adam's apple, choking him. Strangling him. He couldn't breathe, only tighten his hands into fists, muscles shaking with the need to strike out— at anything. Mr. Greene stepped back as if sensing that boiling fury.

Just as suddenly as it came, it was gone.

His whole body flagged, slumping against the nearest casket, a much too expensive maple box lined with shiny rose-colored silk. *Why?* What was the *point*? What comfort would Kuiil get from silk *now*? Or from cotton, or linen, or anything that wasn't rough wood?

There was nothing left of his friend. Kuiil would never get a chance to complain about the expense of frivolous casket linings, nor about the cold getting to his joints in the worst of winter like he did every year. He'd never groan over "those dumb teens" using his diner as a illicit boundary-pushing hangout when he just wanted peace and quiet. He'd never tell Din to get off his ass whenever being a *person* got to be too difficult. In one of their last conversations, Kuiil had scoffed at Din's assurances that he was "fine", something close to "happy", and not at all hiding from making close personal

connections.

*Life's too unpredictable, Sheriff. Stop punishing yourself  
for something you've already been forgiven for.*

Kuiil never failed to call him 'sheriff', the word always said with a gruff sort of pride. Nothing Din said could get Kuiil to stop using it, no matter the context or situation. And whenever Din so much as opened his mouth to argue against whatever advice, unasked for and unwanted, Kuiil gave, he was always interrupted with a brusque "I have spoken" and a hand wave.

Something Din would never hear again.

Back in the too cold, too small showroom, Din covered his face with a hand.

"We're going outside for some air. C'mon, Din," Luke said firmly, an equally firm hand attempting to guide him to the door. Din jerked to a stop, but didn't shake the hand away.

"No," he said roughly. He dropped his hand from his face. "Let's get this done." Despite his less than grateful tone, Mr. Greene didn't look offended, merely held the clipboard in place when Din leaned forward. He plucked the pen from Mr. Greene's other proffered hand and scribbled on the page, his mouth pressed into a thin line and his hand steady.

*he lived in peace*

The pen dropped to the clipboard, almost rolling off the edge, but Din was already striding out the door. He was flayed open, raw, and the sympathetic eyes of the near-stranger on him had made his stomach roil. Too exposed. Too bare. He wished for those days of hiding under his covers, the weight of Arma's hand on his heaving back, the comforting silence as she let him sob into the dark depths of his new bed and scratchy sheets. The days after his parents' sudden and fatal car accident and the years before he'd been formally adopted all blurring together under the dark covers in his hazy childhood memories.



His feet carried him down the sidewalk a short way, digging into his pockets for change as he approached one of the few payphones on this side of downtown. He only had a few dimes, and he pictured that cupholder full of coins back in the Blazer, but this would be enough. It wasn't worth going back.

Moments later, the ringing against his ear cut off and, fortunately, a familiar, smoothly disinterested voice answered instead of one of the myriad of Brenna's clan.

"Arma Herrero speaking."

"Hey, Mamá," Din whispered. His forehead touched the edge of the phone booth, a part of him cringing at what was probably a filthy surface against his skin. He couldn't be bothered to move.

"Mijo, what happened?" Arma asked, the disinterest replaced with sudden sharp focus.

"It's... It's Kuuil," he started quietly.

When he dropped the receiver back as an automated voice warned him of his last minute remaining, Din was steadier, the ground more solid under his feet with his mother's cool advice in his ears. She had immediately offered to come back, but it wasn't often that Arma could fly out to see any of her scattered brood. Brenna, one of her last chicks to leave the nest, had children that called Arma "abuela". They deserved more time with her, and she with them. Din promised he was fine, but it wasn't until he admitted that Luke— and probably his whole family with him— would be helping that Arma finally agreed to finish her long stay in Texas. She hung up after a quiet request to "have a drink for me and *call me*, mijo. If I don't hear from you by the weekend, I'm coming back, damn the money."

Din sighed softly, turning as footsteps approached. Luke stood an arm's length away, one hand shoved in his pocket, the other hanging stiffly at his side.

"You sure you don't want her up here?" Luke asked, making it clear

he'd heard at least some of that.

"I don't want her anywhere near this mess," Din said with a shake of his head.

"I think it's more you don't want her forcing you to take care of yourself. Can't run yourself ragged with Mama Arma on the case," Luke joked, although the humor didn't reach his eyes as usual.

"I don't need her to give me a bedtime, Luke" Din retorted with an eyeroll. He squared his shoulders and inhaled sharply. "I shouldn't have run out."

Luke held up his hand; jointed fingers not quite the color of flesh held Din in place before he could pass by.

"Hey, it's taken care of." Din's brows furrowed, but Luke just smiled, some of the seriousness leaving his blue gaze. "You know how I feel about... about my *allowance*," Luke huffed the word, scowling lightly. "Let me put it to good use, all right? It gets my father off my back about it for a few weeks, too. You'll be helping me out here."

"Luke-

"Nope, no arguments," he interrupted, his hand falling away as he shrugged too casually, his grin crooked. "What else was I gonna do? Let it rot in a bank, maybe use it on new batteries for this bad boy?" His mechanical fingers waggled awkwardly. "I don't *need* his help, you know that. So let me help you out. Let me help out Kuiil. I didn't know him as well as you, obviously, but I liked him, Din. Sometimes I think maybe he liked me, too."

"He didn't like anybody," Din said without thinking, but it made Luke laugh. And that made Din's shoulders and frown relax. He wanted to pay Luke back immediately and refuse the misplaced charity. Kuiil was *Din's* responsibility, his oldest friend and confidante, only Arma knew more about Din's childhood. Hell, Kuiil had been there for it. He knew more about his failed marriage and fractured career than *anybody* else, even Luke.

But Luke was standing there, silent and patient, his expression soft

and encouraging. He actually looked rested, his clothes clean, his eyes clear. He was *present*, because Din had needed him to be. He scoffed under his breath and looked away, and Luke's carefully polite facade broke with a wide grin. They both knew he'd won. Luke stepped up and turned Din around, both hands on his shoulders, and began to push-lead him towards Main Street and their usual lunchtime haunt.

"I know you probably don't have much of an appetite, but let's see if you can choke down a roast beef sub anyway."

Din sighed and let himself be pushed.

He should've seen it coming when Luke mentioned he'd gotten a ride a while ago. He also should've realized it when Luke ordered sandwiches by the bag instead of just two. He *definitely* should've known by the time he passed a very familiar, very beaten up and rusted, once-white-but-now-greyish-brown van on the way up the path to the department's door. But he was shocked stock-still when he walked in to see a tiny brunette boy hanging off Iggy's back like a knapsack and watching with drooping eyes as Iggy typed his latest reports without the slightest hesitation. A tinier brunette girl identical to the monkey-boy ran by screaming a warrior's cry with Mythrol almost in tears and a hand over his phone receiver as he stammered for the girl to be quiet.

Slowly, woodenly, Din turned his whole head to meet Luke's eyes, and saw him smiling sheepishly back.

"Yeah, Han brought me *and* the twins into town," he admitted before holding up the bag. "Yo, monsters, leave those poor guys alone and come get some grub."

There was another war whoop and the girl loped over like a pony stuck in a child's body. The boy eeled off Iggy's back and shadowed his more exuberant sister, his thumb in his mouth and dark brows furrowed. Din left Luke to sort out the twins, making his way into his

office where Han was slouched in a chair, legs widespread, head back, a hand covering his eyes.

“Five more minutes,” Han muttered.

“My office workers are not babysitters,” Din replied curtly. Han jerked upright, blinking in shock.

“I wasn’t expecting y’all for a while. Is everything-”

“It’s been done.”

Han’s eyebrow rose. Then, he nodded and leaned over to grab his tattered leather satchel. Din fell into his chair and tossed his hat and shades to the desk. The thick stack of folded photocopies in his inner jacket pocket followed. There were a few memos on his desk, but luckily, no other missing kids or worse had been called in. Yet. And nothing from the Mayor, even more luckily. He and Captain Junda had already made plans for a curfew enforcement in their last phone call, but they were both hoping it wouldn’t be needed. It would really stretch their deputies too thinly, he might even have to reach out to Hollindale on the other side of the county, and Captain Junda had echoed his groan of annoyance. Neither liked the commanding officer in Hollindale.

“Leia wanted to let you know the reception can be at our place,” Han said, interrupting Din’s pessimistic inner musings. He glanced up at Han with a frown. “Hey, our house is big and she knows everyone you know and more. She’ll make sure people show up and are fed and watered. You know how much she needs to get things done.”

“Yeah... yeah,” Din pinched the bridge of his nose, but it was relief that had him sighing. “Tell her thanks. I... I really appreciate that.”

“Yeah, boss man, we know,” Han said, leaning over the desk to clap Din’s sagging shoulder.

Another sigh, this time annoyed. Before Din could stop him, Han’s eye caught the photocopies and his quick hands had snatched. Trying to snatch it back like a bad game of keep away was *definitely* beneath Din’s dignity, and, anyway, Han probably could help him out faster

than the red tape Din had planned to start wading through. Din reached for his phone, calling Iggy's desk and telling him to look into Teresa Ibanez's last known address. When he dropped the phone, Din noticed there were no memos from Cara and scowled.

Han made a small curious *hmpf* sound as the twins and Luke ran in. The twins' faces were covered in cheese grease and mayonnaise, and they each clutched a bag of chips. Luke passed a small bag into Han's hand as he walked by.

"Chairs, sit, or no cookies," Han said absently.

"We *know*," the twins chorused. They then bent their heads together and engaged in some complicated game of chip switching while whispering furiously. Han smirked, eyes still on the papers. Luke chuckled as he leaned against the window at Din's back after handing him the sandwich bag.

"What's going on?"

"I'm letting your brother snoop," Din admitted. His arms crossed over his chest and he glanced between the two men, watching as Han's face began to pale, his mouth firming into a tight line, and Luke munched obliviously on his all veggie sub.

"Big o' you," Luke said around his mouthful.

"It would be faster. I'm pretty sure the names in there are familiar to him already," Din said quietly. Han looked up, surprised. "Leia didn't come by just to tell me to make nice with Luke. She told me to keep Luke away from my case."

"And you're ignoring her?" Luke asked with a little crooked grin that couldn't quite smooth away the frown creasing his forehead. "Why? I mean, I know I hate the lab, but I've hated it from the moment it started getting built. Why would she care *now*?"

"Dr. Gideon is involved."

"Jesus *Christ*, Din," Han snapped as all the blood drained from Luke's face.

“What? *What?* Han.” Luke turned to his brother-in-law, face carefully blank and sandwich dropping onto the desk. “Han, did you know?”

“I... I knew Gideon was in the lab, yeah, kid,” Han admitted, slapping the file shut. “Leia didn’t actually know that anything to do with... with the Project was going on-”

“The Project? *The project?*” Luke snarled, all facade dropped. The twins froze in their seats, staring at their uncle in something like fear. “*What do you mean the project?* Project 66? Project *sixty-fucking-six?*” Luke demanded, his flesh hand slamming on the desk and making everything rattle.

“Yo, sarge, my kids are here-”

“I don’t care, Han! You *knew?*”

“Daddy?” Jacen whispered while his sister gaped at the adults wordlessly.

Din got to his feet and grabbed Luke’s shoulder, whom looked ready to punch Han in the face, child-audience or not. “Luke, stop.”

“You don’t get it, Din! But *he* does,” Luke shouted, waving a hand at Han. He didn’t even bother to hide his guilt, shifting side to side on his feet and dragging a hand through his hair. “He *knows* what they are. They were- They were here this *whole time?*”

“I didn’t know it was Project 66, Luke,” Han managed to say.

“It’s *Gideon*. Of course it’s Project 66!” Luke all but spat the words, shoulder jerking under Din’s hand. He automatically gripped tighter, grabbing Luke’s other shoulder to spin him half around to face Din. His face was too pale, eyes too wide, and it felt like Din had been punched in the sternum. He had never seen Luke look... afraid, and it had Din pulling Luke a little closer.

“Whatever is going on, we’re looking into it now. We’ll figure it out,” he promised lowly.

“But Han-” Luke pulled away again, trying to turn. Din quickly cupped Luke’s face, like he had the other night, and Luke froze,

eyebrows rising just like he had then. "You're not distracting me again."

"Han made a call, and so did your sister, to protect you. It was a dumb call-"

"*Din*," Han groaned, rolling his eyes upwards.

"-and we're fixing that today. So, Solo's gonna calm down his kids, and you're gonna help, and then you're both telling me what the *hekriff* Project 66 is and what's it doing in my backyard." Din turned to Han, whom was scowling furiously at Din between glances at his cowering and barely sniffing six-years-olds and a grey-faced Luke. "Got it, Solo?"

"Fine, you're right," Han gave in with his hands up. He took a long step towards his kids and knelt in front of them, his hands gently touching their faces and ruffling their hair as he murmured to them.

Looking back at Luke, Din watched as he closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. The next breath was deeper, calmer, and his lips moved around soundless numbers. Counting for each inhale, hold, and exhale. "Fuck," he whispered, so quietly that Din barely heard him when his breath no longer rattled out of his throat. "I messed up, didn't I?"

"A little bit."

Luke chuffed a near-silent *heh*, opening his eyes to meet Din's. For a long moment, Luke's gaze darted over Din's face. Slowly, his mouth tipped up on the side until Din could feel Luke's smile under his thumb. "I need to say sorry."

"Oh. Right." Din's hands all but jumped away, hovering awkwardly before they fell to his side and he turned, clearing his throat. Luke chuckled under his breath, but his hand trailed down Din's arm as he walked towards the sniffing kids.

Din watched him kneel next to Han, talking quietly to the twins, grinning his sunny smile and letting them play with his prosthetic hand after a few words. Han got to his feet, patting Luke's back. Luke

met his eyes, and an entire silent conversation stretched and snapped in the air between them, ending with the return of Luke's crooked smile and a nod. He jolted, barking a startled laugh, when Jaina made his fingers convulse, and, before they could get concerned, made a series of over-the-top robot noises so the twins would screech with laughter instead. By the time Han got back to the desk, hand outstretched, Din was already holding out the papers again, his eyes still on Luke and his expression too soft.

He wondered if Luke would make the Kid laugh like that, too? He was basically a giant kid himself when he wasn't on a wild tear-

"Did you meet him today?" Han asked, scanning the poorly printed photocopy.

Din startled in place, turning to Han and pretending like he couldn't tell how closely Luke was listening, funny puppet voices for the twins aside.

"No. I don't even know if he was there. A doctor there gave me and Dune a heads-up on some... less than normal circumstances in the lower labs, and he could've been down there," Din said with a shrug. Han's eyes met his, mouth parting around the obvious questions. "Said there was some kinda chemical leak." Din's mouth thinned as he explained. "It was obviously not the whole truth, but an entire wing of the lab was quarantined. Since Monday morning, that Dr. Bonteri could tell."

"Fu-*fun* story," Han said, sighing through his nose. He glanced down at the papers again and blinked. "Ibanez? Didn't I just hear you ask for this woman's address?"

"Yeah." He waved at Han to continue reading, eyes on Luke back on his feet and heading their way, the twins mollified at last by cookies. Luke slid a few pages out of Han's grip, scowling when Han tried to hold onto them. It just took a quick scan of headlines and grainy photos for Luke's face to pale and his mouth to pull tight and low. Other than that, he kept his cool this time.

"I recognize a lot of these guys," Luke said.



"I was afraid of that," Han sighed.

"Wait, a stolen baby, a *boy*? Six years ago? Isn't that missing- Oh, shi-oot." He raised his eyes to meet Din's, words coming out breathlessly, as if the realization had physically punched him in the chest.

"What is this about Project 66 and what's it have to do with you, or the kid?" Din asked, hands shoved in his pockets and the paper bracelet burning against his knuckles.

Luke rubbed a hand over his mouth. Han slumped back into the chair he was in before with a quick look at his kids.

"The stuff they're describing in the news articles, it was like that. A *lot* of that, but all with fancier sounding names, 'prescriptions' layered deep in science jargon, but underneath it all was the same kinda crap they're naming in here," Han answered for Luke, tone weary and thin. "What I could find out was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo about making soldiers more durable, longer lasting, maybe even immune to the side effects of their worst chemical bombs. Have you ever heard about Operation Ranch Hand? Agent Orange?"

Din scowled, eyes darting to Luke quickly.

"We were told it would make our senses sharper, our reflexes faster, make us stronger and more alert. Think Captain America and you've basically got Project 66," Luke said, smirking without a trace of humor.

"That sounds..." Din trailed off, but Han and Luke exchanged matching wry looks.

"Impossible. Ridiculous. *Bullcrap*? Yeah, it does," Luke agreed with a shrug. "But I trusted the guy in charge. Palpatine was..." He licked his lips, his shoulders curling forward and his hand curling into a fist at his side. "I can't describe, exactly, how much he could get under your skin. Make you believe in the craziest things, but they always sounded so... believable. *Amazing*. He made me feel like I could show... show *everyone* just what I was made of, what I could be. And my father... my father vouched for him, for everything. I was a dumb kid from a hick town, desperate to prove myself for all the wrong

reasons, and I got caught up in the idea of being a hero. And then I saw what it could do, what we could do... it wasn't just a fantasy by the end..."

Luke was looking at no one and nothing, his blue eyes clouded and distant, voice eerily soft and emotionless. Han made a swiftly aborted motion towards him, the care he normally kept hidden etching deep lines on his face.

"And then we started dying, one by one," Luke murmured. He didn't seem to notice Han's movements or Din's heavy gaze.

The room's temperature seemed to drop, every hair on Din's body rising, goosebumps crawling up and down his limbs. What he was hearing was still *impossible*, the stuff of science fiction movies and HG Wells novels, but he couldn't tear his eyes from Luke's face. Luke shook himself, that horribly blank expression falling apart and leaving the tired and guilty survivor in its place. He glanced back at the twins; luckily, they merely blinked back at him.

"Are you talkin' 'bout Vietnam?" Jaina asked, completely oblivious to the chocolate smeared across her teeth or the tension in the room. "Mommy says we can't ask 'bout Vietnam, but I wanna hear 'bout the jungles!"

"Yeah, and the monkeys. There's monkeys in jungles," Jacen said eagerly. "And *tigers*."

"There were monkeys and tigers, and lots of other animals," Luke told them, and their eyes lit up. "But I'll have to tell you more about them when I stay the night sometime."

"You *never* stay over," Jaina grumbled, falling against the back of the chair and kicking at the legs with her heels.

"Yeah. Only on big days." Jacen pouted, then pulled a few toy cars out of his pockets. Jaina quickly did the same before they ran out of the room, their uncle and the jungles already forgotten.

"I hope Iggy and Myth don't mind being babysitters for a while," Han said in amusement.

“They’ll survive. You were talking about Project 66,” Din said shortly, his gaze on Luke’s.

Luke nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, well, the Project was scrapped a few months before the end of the war was called. Too many things were going wrong, and the wrong people, for *them*, were sniffing around.” Han smirked, smugger than Artoo when the beast-cat got into Threepio’s cage and gave the poor bird a conniption. “That Gideon guy, he came to the Facility a few times to oversee the experiment, but the Project wasn’t exactly what he wanted it to be, but I didn’t hear much. I was just a pawn, a good one, but a pawn,” Luke said with a wry twist of his mouth. “He wasn’t exactly fired, but he was sent off somewhere. I got the impression he was doing it his way somewhere else, with a lot less funding.”

“What do you know about that? His way?”

Luke frowned, looking off in that middle distance again, but pensively. Not frozen and *gone*. “He wanted to push more at the boundaries of the mind, I think? Push further than what Palpatine’s goals for us were.”

“It looks like he decided using young women without much power of their own was the best way to get his results,” Han said, tone low. “The women in these articles are all immigrants or from poor families. I can look into what compensation these different women got, but I’m pretty sure they did it for the money. Except for this one, this Ibanez, she’s the outlier in more than one way.” He tapped the article.

“The other women all quietly disappeared when the Project ended,” Din agreed. “But not her. She was also part of the scientist *team*. She has a PhD from a Brazilian university. What she was doing as a subject...”

“So, she was an accredited scientist, she actually filed suits against them all, and claimed this project she was a part of stole her child. Sheesh, she named Gideon specifically. Sounds like my kinda lady,” Han whistled under his breath. “She said that her pregnancy was kept secret from her and the moment she realized she was knocked up, she

tried to leave.”

“If Dr. Ibanez was pregnant during those experiments, do you think... the other women were?” Din asked slowly.

Luke inhaled sharply, eyes closing, and Han cursed under his breath.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Han muttered, flipping through more pages.

“Gideon wanted younger and younger recruits, I remember that,” Luke hissed, rubbing his forehead. “He was sorta pissed that the team I recommended to the program with me were soldiers my age or older. I wanted people I knew already, people I’d already been on tour with. Gideon pushed for raw recruits,” Luke said softly. “I thought it was about... about naivete, you know? About making their loyalty more to the Project than to *me*, their CO. Not... not the *age*.”

“We need to get to Dr. Ibanez and see what happened. Why did it settle out of court? Where did these other women go? Why was she a subject? What happened to the child and is it the same kid that Kuil called in about?” Han muttered to himself, already pacing and scribbling in the margins. Luke watched him, somewhere between amused and concerned.

“That’s the Han I met in ‘Nam,” Luke said, stepping closer to Din to speak under his breath and Han’s fervent mutters. “He and Chewie were helicopter pilots. The amount of chocolate he smuggled to the locals could give Willy Wonka diabetes.” Din snorted quietly. “When he caught on to all the *shit* everyone over there was going through, he made a big stink about it being none of his business, but...” He jerked his chin and grinned that fake grin that didn’t reach his eyes. “That’s the tip of the iceberg right there.”

Din stared down at Luke’s profile, the slope of his nose a few scant inches lower, and waited for Luke to look up. Confusion bled into Luke’s features, eyebrows rising.

“Commanding officer? Anything to do with the ‘sarge’ nickname?”

“I see why you got your badge.” Luke teased. “And yeah... sergeant.

First Sergeant by the end, but that was mostly a formality. You gonna ask about the medals next?"

"The *what?*" Din cut himself off at Luke's shit-eating grin. He cleared his throat and looked up at Han. "Solo, reel it in. This is my investigation, so stop trying to do it for me."

"You don't have the resources or time that I do," Han argued.

"I have resources and I'll *make* the time."

"If I know anything about these spooks, wires will be tapped. Whatever you're looking into, they'll find out, Djarin," Han retorted. Din blinked, and that foreboding from the morning came back.

"I'll deal with it."

"Fantastic," Han groaned, staring upwards. "The Man beating me down and stealing my glory again."

"You just don't like being told what to do," Luke laughed.

"Let me go with you to meet this Ibanez. I might catch something neither of you do. Luke doesn't know the details like I do, either," Han argued.

"Really. I was just the first guinea pig of the Project, but of course *you're* the expert."

"You know what I mean, kid. I did the research."

"And I did the living-"

"You can come if you can keep your mouth shut," Din interrupted, *not* sighing. He turned to Luke with an uncomfortable grimace. "I don't know if..."

"Oh *hell no*," Luke started heatedly.

The harsh and abrupt ringing of an unfamiliar phone was the only reason they stopped so soon. They turned to stare at Han, who was smirking, all teeth and amusement, at the two of them. His eyebrow

rose.

“What?”

“It’s coming from your bag,” Din said pointedly.

Han yanked at the satchel, digging out a massive... thing that vaguely looked like a phone. Or walkie-talkie. Had Din seen a commercial about that thing? A motorola?

“Organa-Solo here,” Han said quickly. After whoever it was spoke a few words, his eyes widened incredibly and he turned away.

Din hissed and flinched as Luke slapped at his arm using his *prosthetic hand*. Din glared, and Luke glared back.

“You are *not* sidelining me,” he hissed. “I don’t care what Han says, I know what to listen for, what to ask about. If she was part of the trials, I’m the *only* one here with an *actual* similar experience.”

“Your sister-”

“Are you afraid of Leia now?”

“Who *isn’t*?”

“*Din.*”

“*Luke.*”

“All right, I’ll be there.” They spun towards Han, who was putting his phone away and frowning darkly. “Ben got in a fight at school.”

“*Ben?*” Luke repeated incredulously. “I thought he got over that phase.”

“Yeah, hilariously that same girl was involved. *And* Principal Ti is talking suspension.” Han put the few photocopies he still had into his satchel. “I got some people that can look into these women for us quietly. Just being on Ibanez’s trail is gonna put up enough flags. Let me do this, Djarin.”

Din frowned, then sighed heavily through his nose and nodded. “Just those four women. I’ll keep your advice about the tapping in mind.”

Han nodded, reached over to clap Luke’s shoulder, and then hurried toward the door. “Swing by the house tonight. Leia’s gonna wanna see you both after giving Ben his earful.”

“Roger that, Captain Solo.” The look of disgust on Han’s face before he disappeared had Luke chuckling. He tilted his head to the side and met Din’s expectant gaze. “Time for an adventure?”

Rolling his eyes heavenward, Din grabbed the forgotten sandwich, his hat and shades, and let Luke lead the way. He had to leave a memo for Cara anyway.

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Principal Ti’s office was probably the nicest room in the whole school, though Rey wished she didn’t know that fact so well. She’d been here so often that she knew exactly how many watercolors hung on the wall, which ones were seascapes, which ones were strangely gorgeous shades of color with no form or shape. She knew exactly which ficus was set in which corner, and that, in the spring, the pots on the windowsill were always bursting with a rainbow of various flowers. She also knew that the small tray on the corner of the desk was sometimes a small sand and stone dish with a little rake, and other times it was a small pine tree, and other times it was a set of hanging balls that constantly swung when tapped. If she had any skill with a pencil, she would be able to draw the whole place with her eyes closed.

Finn, Ben, Poe, and Rey sat in seats outside the office. Armie, the little rat, had already come and gone with his parents, sneering upper-class jerks that carted out a cowed and scowling Armie between them. His story had made it clear just who the instigators had been, and his punishment was meted out quickly. The rest of them had to wait, heels cooling and heads bowed, as their very busy parents were called and had to leave their jobs that most of them

couldn't afford to leave. From what Rey overheard, Ben's dad had to be tracked down via his *mobile phone*. She had no idea that *anyone* in Hawkins even had one of those.

Rey, however, was kicking her feet and glaring at the ground while her friends looked anywhere but her after Principal Ti's latest announcement. When she glanced up from under the hanging strands of her messy hair, only Ben was looking back, his face inscrutable. She rolled her eyes at him and glared down at the ground again.

It hadn't exactly been a *shock* when Principal Ti had sat next to Rey, precariously balanced on the arm of the chair, and crossed her hands on her knee. Told Rey with a voice that would gentle a spooked horse that 'your guardian has decided not to come, that any punishment we set forth he would accept. He also said you were to return directly home on the bus.' Rey had scoffed and filled in the blanks herself; her grandfather's usual cutting remarks about her being wild and unruly, a disappointment of a girl, that she deserved any and all punishments, the more severe the better. It was written all over Principal Ti's face, the faint creases of concern and distaste as her darkly fathomless eyes roved over Rey's wooden features and bandaged cheek.

Then, Finn's mom and dad had rushed into the office, eyes wide and shocked, and hurried to both Rey and Finn, checking over their scrapes and scolding them quietly; Poe's whirlwind of a mother right on their heels. Although, her scolds were a bit less like scolds, and more let barely restrained laughs as Poe mumbled his side of the story to her. Rey was pretty sure she heard Ms. Bey ask Poe how come he got caught, wasn't he fastest forward on the soccer team? It had been a *while* later, another class bell having rung, before Mr. Organa-Solo raced in, clothes askew, baffled and exhausted, and two practically identical kids hanging from each leg.

Ms. Bey and Dr. and Mr. Bonteri had stood up, shaking hands with Mr. Organa-Solo, who had been even more baffled as he muttered their names and shook their hands familiarly. Ms. Bey had even given him a backslapping hug and scooped the awestruck twins up onto her hips without breaking a sweat. Which was when Principal Ti had called the parents in and left the teens, plus two six-year-olds, in the waiting room with the receptionist. After bugging their surly older



brother for the first few minutes, they'd eventually made their way to the other three and finally settled down in front of Poe, who was regaling them with stories of famous pilots and race car drivers.

The door to the principal's office opened and Mr. Organa-Solo was the first one out, giving his son a *Look*. Ben scowled harder and sunk deeper into his uncomfortable chair.

"You're facing your mother on your own," he warned. Ben sunk lower, his chin almost touching his belly button. The twins turned to stare, whispering "ooo" in gleeful shock.

"And you," Ms. Bey strode over to her son, whom was suddenly stock-still and wide-eyed, shoulders straight enough to break a board. Ms. Bey cuffed him gently around the head. "You and your overblown sense of chivalry in *this* day and age? Whatever will we do with you?"

Dr. Bonteri and Mr. Bonteri came up, glancing over at Ms. Bey with barely suppressed smiles, before turning on Rey and Finn with serious frowns on their faces.

"We stood in for your grandfather today, Rey. We know he can't leave the house easily," Dr. Bonteri said mildly, not a single trace of what obvious *bullshit* that was in her tone or on her face. "Principal Ti agreed to discuss the punishment for both of you with us."

"Do you know how close you were to suspension, you especially, Rey?" Mr. Bonteri asked, crouching down on one knee to meet her lowered gaze. She looked up and then away. There was something so earnest and *kind* about Mr. Bonteri, disappointing him always had her and Finn feeling like worse than dirt. Dr. Bonteri could wither them in a glance, but Mr. Bonteri always made them feel like weepy little kids. Finn and Rey's eyes met and quickly flicked to the side.

"msorry," Rey mumbled, the toe of a sneaker squeaking on tile.

"I'm sorry, too, Mom, Dad," Finn said just as quietly. Dr. Bonteri cupped the back of Finn's neck gently while Mr. Bonteri smoothed Rey's hair out of her face.

"No more fights, you two. You're both much better behaved than this. Well, sometimes," Dr. Bonteri said, amusement dancing in her light eyes as she glanced over Rey. Who looked up just in time to see the shadow of a wink. Rey blushed and ducked her head again.

"Ben, I just," Mr. Organa-Solo propped his hands on his hips and sighed. "You finally act like your mother and it's for all the wrong reasons."

"Jeez, *thanks*, Dad," Ben seethed, face ruddy.

"Is Ben *really* in trouble?," Jaina asked, eyes perfectly round.

"Ben's *never* in trouble," Jacen whispered, edging closer to his brother and wrapping his arms around Ben's shin. Ben crossed his arms over his chest and scowled, face fighting a tomato for hue.

"In-school suspension," Mr. Organa-Solo said. Ben startled and stared up at him. "It'll be worse for you at home. *All* the babysitting."

"*Dad.*"

"You all, too," Ms. Bey said, causing the other three to snap their heads towards her. There was still something that twinkled in her eyes and tugged at the corner of her mouth, but the tone was serious. "In-school suspension for three days. And detention on Saturday morning."

"What is this, the Breakfast Club?" Ben muttered.

"Does that mean we have to miss practice?" Finn realized in horror.

Rey pressed her lips together, holding in the panic at the idea of *more school* keeping her from looking for Rose. But Saturday was days away. Surely she could find Rose before Saturday?

"You two almost got suspended from the next game," Dr. Bonteri told Poe and Finn, whom both gaped at her. "You pull another stunt like this, you're *off the team* for the rest of the year."

"The year!?" Finn gasped.

"They can't do that! It was one stupid fight and *he's* the one that said-" Poe protested, already pointing at Ben furiously, only to break off and flinch into silence under his mother's warning glance.

"Keep talking and I'll let Principal Ti change it to a real suspension, from classes *and* the team," Ms. Bey said. Poe's mouth worked soundlessly, lips pulled tightly shut, and he glared at his feet. Finn discreetly knocked his shoulder against Poe's, not quite moving away until Poe met his eye, smiling ruefully.

"Principal Ti is already getting the rest of your school work from your teachers. Once you've got your assignments, we're heading home and you'll be putting your noses to the grindstone. No shenanigans or goofing off, and *no practice*," Mr. Bonteri added with a glance at Finn and Poe when their mouths opened.

"Making you study is basically a dream come true, but there are a bunch of animals, and that *bird*, to check on tonight. *Without* your car," Mr. Organa-Solo told Ben.

"What?! You're gonna make me *walk* to Uncle Luke's?" Ben burst out incredulously. "He doesn't even need me to-"

"He'll be out of town for the rest of the day, so, yeah, he needs you to do all his chores. And I'm not completely unreasonable. *I'll* drive you."

Ben looked ready to vomit. "In the van?"

"In the van."

From the principal's doorway, Principal Ti cleared her throat. The whole group, now feeling extremely squashed in the what was actually a good-sized outer office, turned to her.

"Some class representatives will be here soon with your assignments. You'll report to the library in the morning and spend the rest of the week studying the lessons *alone*. If you have questions, you can of course see your individual teachers during the breaks with a pass, or after school. For our athletes, you can attend the regulatory practices tomorrow on, but Saturday morning you'll be back in the library.

Understand?" She met each teen's eyes, an elegantly shaped eyebrow rising until they chorused— out of sync— their reluctant yeses. She looked to the parents and smiled kindly. "Thank you, again, for getting here and taking it seriously. Especially you, Mr. Organa-Solo."

"Still weird hearing my whole name like that, but yeah, anytime, Ms. Ti." He gave her a cheeky salute with two fingers at his brow. Ben rolled his eyes and groaned under his breath. Mr. Organa-Solo cut his son a glance, his smirk sharper than before. "Yuck it up, kid, you're still cleaning the chicken coop."

"Cleaning it!?" Ben asked, his voice cracking in horror. Rey barely managed to hide her smirk in time.

A few students that Rey barely recognized, but Poe greeted with cheeky grins and winks by first name, came in to drop off their assignments. His mother cuffed Poe round the back of his head again, too soft to do more than make a quiet *thwup* sound and him snicker without a trace of shame. Assignments given, the teenagers took off towards their lockers, the parents staying behind to talk to Principal Ti, their voices quieter and more serious, something about a reception at the Organa-Solo house mentioned. Rey took off down a hallway on her own, Poe and Finn's shared locker across the school, and who knows where Ben and his trailing siblings had gone off to. There wasn't much time before the next bell, and she hurriedly fumbled her way through grabbing the books and things she needed to shove them into her bag. The Bonteris had told them to meet outside rather than go back to the office, and Rey rushed down the hall, jerking at the zipper of her bag while her mind raced. The sound of high-pitched childish whining and laughing caught her attention. Dread curled in her gut as Ben and the twins came around a corner between her and the exit.

Ben stopped, boots squeaking on tile, and stared at her where she stood frozen. Jaina's legs were tucked under his armpits, her skinny arms wrapped too tight around his throat, and Jacen had one hand around Ben's coat and the other dragging his bulging backpack, face red and frowning in concentration as he tried to heft it off the ground and carry it. It fell with a thump when Jacen stuck his thumb in his mouth and hid behind his brother more fully.

“Look! It’s the *girl*,” Jaina shout-whispered right into Ben’s ear, making him wince. He knelt without a word and Jaina whined as she hopped down.

“Go take my bag to Dad, I’m coming,” he told them, shoving Jacen and Jaina towards the exit. They grumbled, and looked over their shoulders to gawk at Rey, but each took up a side of the backpack and ran-stumbled their way outside. Leaving Ben slouched so low it looked painful, eyes on the floor; Rey shuffled from foot to foot.

“Are you gonna say something or just think really hard at the floor?” Rey asked, frustration forcing the words out more sharply than intended.

His shoulders curled further inward, about to completely fold into himself even as he scowled furiously. He finally looked up and then away, jaw ticking.

“Sorry.”

“Excuse me?” Rey blurted.

“Sorry,” he repeated louder and more clearly. “I shouldn’t’ve... that word I said. I shouldn’t have said it.”

Silence echoed in the empty hallway, so vast she could hear the distant murmurs of students and teachers still in class. Her eyes burned, staring hard enough at the exit doors they seemed to ripple.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t’ve. You were being a dick,” she said numbly.

“Great, fine. Yet another thing you can hate me for, you’re welcome,” Ben snapped, all contrition gone. He spun on his heel and stormed towards the exit.

“Hey, you don’t get to *say that*,” Rey half-shouted, barely remembering to catch herself and hiss the last words. She all but ran forward, her open bag slapping her legs until she grabbed his arm and yanked him to a stop. He shook her off immediately, but... he stayed put, glaring at her feet, his brows so close together they looked merged. “*You* were the dick. After last night, after what we heard, and Rose-”

“Rose. It’s *always* about Rose.” Rey’s mouth snapped shut and Ben’s fiercely low words all but spat out of him. “And before Rose, it was about *Finn*. You’re... you’re so *blind*, do you get that? I spent years trying to... to get you to even talk to me, but all you and Finn cared about were yourselves.”

“You... you what? You were a *jerk* to us our whole lives! Ever since I came to Hawkins!” Rey protested. The situation was spiralling out of her control, what did any of this have to do with *now*?

“I was only a jerk because it was the only way for you two *idiots* to pay attention to anyone not each other. It was the Finn and Rey Club against the whole damn *world*,” Ben told her, finally meeting her eyes. “You were so busy thinking the whole world was out to get you, you never noticed that I had *zero friends* the entire damn time. You two were the only ones that talked to me, even if was just to push me around.”

Rey blinked. She *had* kinda pushed him down a lot in elementary. And middle school.

“That doesn’t explain last year,” Rey said, rallying quickly and grabbing at her fast slipping control on the situation.

“Yeah, let’s talk about *last year*,” Ben snarled, looming over her, forcing her back, back, back up against the bulletin board near the janitor’s closet. Posters wrinkled under her head, a pin fell with a loud ping by her sneakers, at least another four dug into her shoulders. “Let’s talk about how for a whole summer you *deigned* to be my friend.”

“It was more than a summer,” Rey muttered staring *hard* at his faded tee, the skeleton crowned and surrounded by roses on his chest between the gaps of his heavy black coat.

“Hardly,” Ben snapped. His hand braced on the board by her head, and, as he leaned down, Rey cringed lower and flatter to the wall, hands pressed to the painted brick wall by her hips. “I showed up at that *junkyard* to buy my first shitty ass car, and somewhere between making fun of me and getting a free pop, you and Finn decided I was finally enough of a dweeby outcast to be in your exclusive little

club.”

Rey’s eyes closed and her breath, pulled up from deep in her belly, rattled out of her throat. She remembered that afternoon. She remembered spending those first weeks scoffing, then teasing, then laughing at a Ben that struggled with oil changes and spark plugs and sprockets that didn’t exist. Until the first time Ben really *laughed* when Rey messed up and managed to get herself stuck under a broken down Pinto, her legs kicking at nothing as she cursed loudly and virulently enough to have *Plutt* shocked while the two teen boys hefted and heaved and *laughed* getting her free. Finn was the one to hand over that Pepsi can and invite Ben to sit with them. They talked about music and high school and their dream cars. About concerts they were dying to go to and road trips they planned in meticulous details.

“We weren’t-” Rey started quietly.

“And then freshman year started, and Rose showed up. And all you cared about was *Rose*, the *new* girl. The Californian who was smarter and prettier and more interesting than *anyone else*, and best of all, she was trailer park trash *just like you*. She didn’t have to jump through hoops and prove herself.”

“Oh, yeah, call us trash some more, *that* definitely proves we were wrong about you,” Rey snapped, shoving at his chest, face burning and twisted into a furious grimace. It felt odd on her face, too much like the Old Guy, making her skin and insides prickle and squirm, feeling all that rage and hurt boil. “You spent *weeks* being a dick to Finn, did you forget that part? The moment he started going for sports, and he and Poe became such good friends-”

“*Friends*,” Ben rolled his with a scoff. Rey’s face burned hotter in embarrassed fury for Poe and Finn. “Poe was just one more person you let into your stupid group to push *me* out.”

“Or maybe you just hate us dykes and fa-”

“*Don’t*,” Ben grabbed her arms, hands almost bruising as he pushed her into the wall, her breath whooshing out of her, too shocked to shove back as she gaped up into Ben’s flushed brick-red face. Pins fell

with a ringing clatter, posters and a small triangular school banner slithered down to the ground. “Don’t you say that word,” he seethed, eyes flashing.

Rey licked her lips, scowling in confusion. “You said it first. And you’re *hurting* me.”

His hands sprang off her arms, flying up high and wide, slowly dropping, his shoulders drooping and his eyes falling to the ground. For such a tall boy, he suddenly looked small and sad. Rey rubbed at her arms and he flinched.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t have...” He broke off with a painfully contorted expression.

“What if I am? What if *they* are?” Rey murmured, balling her hands into fists. “Is it something you said ‘cuz you’re angry, or something you really *believe*?”

“I don’t *care* about that. I *don’t*,” Ben hoarsely whispered, but it felt like a shout. He heaved in a breath, hands convulsing at his sides and the blood draining from his face. When his eyes snapped to hers, she felt her mouth part around a small gasp. His eyes were shining, looking ready to *cry*. Ben Solo was going to *cry*? “I wouldn’t ever have a problem with *that*. It’s just about yo-” His mouth snapped shut, teeth clacking so hard Rey winced at the sound. Before she could... ask? Say something? Anything? His mouth wrenched open again as he spat out, “Not that it matters what I meant though, right? I messed up. It was all you were waiting for, a perfect reason to hate me all over again. I just gave it to you.”

“Wh-what? No, that’s not-” Rey stammered. She somehow still felt pinned under his hands, against the wall, unable to breathe-

“Whatever.”

Her head barely turned, body frozen, and she watched him march out the doors. The doors banged. A bell rang. Students began to filter into the halls. And Rey raced after him, throwing her whole weight against the doors and hanging on, breathing harsh enough for that few feet to have been a marathon. In the parking lot, Ben’s dad



walked up to him, and even in the late afternoon sunlight and his giant aviators covering most of his face, Mr. Organa-Solo looked concerned, taking a few, long strides away from his van to meet his son, cupping a hand around the back of Ben's neck. Ben slapped his dad's hand away, ducking when his dad leaned close, mouth moving quickly. Ben shrugged him off without sparing a glance at his siblings clamoring for his attention in their safety seats in the van. While Ben loped, ungainly and slouched and too small-too tall towards his Bug, Mr. Organa-Solo looked up. Across all distance, he found Rey hanging from the door and her burning wide eyes. She couldn't figure out why or how, everything Ben said had made zero sense, but guilt settled in her guts like lead. She gulped and quaked under Ben's dad's sunshade-guarded eyes.

The weight of that gaze disappeared. Mr. Organa-Solo ran a hand through his hair, the other hand on his hip, and his head tipped back to stare up to the sky. Then, he was swinging his long, lean body into the van and chugging after his son's death trap of a Volkswagen. As the two vehicles chortled out of the school lot, a relatively nicer and newer sedan pulled up and Rey saw the Bonteris waiting for her.

"Honey, get in," Dr. Bonteri called. From the backseat, Finn leaned over to throw open the door. Rey breathed in deep, slow, and made her way down, cringing lightly as the exit door slammed shut behind her. She slid in and buckled up and Finn leaned close.

"Are you okay?"

Rey's lips wobbled, but, with another quiet breath, she got a real smile on her face to show Finn. "Of course. Ran into Solo on the way out, but... he was just being... him..."

Finn frowned, but nodded. His hand wrapped around hers, squeezing tight.

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Bloomington wasn't quite as far as Indianapolis, but it was far enough

that Din's anxiety was ratcheting up with each mile farther away. The Kid had Karga, he'd be safe, he'd be okay. He'd have food and a bed to sleep in if Din was later than planned. Karga had an entire cabinet of rifles of his own- oh, shit, he had *a cabinet of rifles*. It was a stupidly fancy one with a glass door, too. If the Kid-

"Din?"

A hand fell on his knee, and he startled in place. When he turned, Luke's hands were up in the air, his face carefully blank.

"That wasn't... it wasn't *you*," Din said quickly, almost forgetting he was driving. Luke blinked once and the tension in his body melted away with a rueful little laugh.

"Okay, that's good to know. I thought maybe everything got a little too weird for you."

"You've always been weird."

The laugh that came next was without shame or an edge, clearly and genuinely Luke. By the time it ebbed away, Din was smiling, his eyes firmly on the road and his white-knuckled grip loosened. Karga was a widower, with grown kids and grandkids in Illinois. He could handle one kid... superpowers or not. Din's fingers tapped the wheel, and then:

"Super soldier?"

Luke's head tipped back onto the seat and he hefted a loud sigh. "Something like that."

Luke wasn't one to hedge unless he didn't want to say anything at all. "And sergeant," he added thoughtfully.

"Yeah. But, because of the whole... Project thing, it was different. I didn't have the usual eight men under my command, only four. My best friend... he was my corporeal. It was weird, at first, to have Biggs listen to *me*. I grew up following *him* around," Luke said, voice soft and warm and sad all at once.

"Hm."

“Hard to believe this washed-up old has-been was a someone once upon a time?” Luke joked. The smile slipped off Din’s face and he darted a glance over. His voice had been too sharp around the edges, and the broken twist of his mouth was further proof.

“You don’t need me to stoke your ego, Skywalker. You’ll always be a someone in our town.”

“Not always for good reasons,” Luke argued, but the blade was gone from his voice.

“I think chaining yourself to trees and standing up for your ideals are pretty good reasons.”

“Oh my *god*, you know about that?”

“It came up.” Din smirked at Luke’s loud groan. His gaze narrowed at an upcoming turn off. The blinker went on and Luke perked up, immediately gazing out the window.

The house in the ‘burbs was a bit worn-down and worn-out, but clean. Pretty, even, with the flowers mostly winning against the weeds in the front yard and the exterior walls painted a buttery, inviting yellow. There was a small sedan in the driveway, but no garage, and the mailbox, as they rattled past, read ‘Ibanez’. Which meant it was either the family home, the doctor had kept her maiden name, or had never married. No use hypothesizing, though. Luke inhaled sharply and shook out his left hand.

“Not sure I’m ready to meet the next batch,” he admitted lowly.

“I don’t think super soldiers is what they were going for with these women,” Din pointed out dryly, but he reached out to clasp Luke’s shoulder, squeezing gently. Luke tilted his head and leveled Din with a Look eerily similar to Leia’s at her judgiest and most tired moments. Usually it was directed at whatever ridiculous shenanigan Han had found himself in, so it was a little galling to be at the receiving end of it now.

They swung out of the Blazer, their paces matching when they came around the hood of the SUV. There was a little frog at the front

holding a small sign saying: 'Welcome to Our Pad'. He heard Luke chuckle as they passed.

The woman that answered Din's knock was dark and petite with a mass of wild black curls tied back into a bushy ponytail. Her eyes were weary and had insomnia-made smudges under them, faint lines along every corner on her face, and not a single ounce of make up. She stared at them, puzzled, and kept the door barely ajar.

"What do you want?" she asked, a trace of her Brazilian accent in the stress and vowels of her speech.

"Dr. Ibanez? We're here to talk about a series of experiments back in the seventies, and your son," Din explained, holding up his sheriff's badge.

Instead of clearing, her expression only fell into deeper lines of confusion. She stared at the badge a little longer, then met Din's eyes. "You're looking for *Doctor* Ibanez? Teresa?"

Luke and Din glanced at each other, frowning

"Yes?" Luke said slowly, his eyebrows rising.

The woman huffed, making a barely out of sight movement with her hand. "I'm Becca Ibanez, her sister. You better... I guess you better come in." The door finally opened to reveal her shabby house-dress and fuzzy socks.

A while later, Becca was puffing on a cigarette, leaning against the TV stand, watching Luke kneel in front of Doctor Teresa Ibanez. Or what was left of the scientist she'd once been. It took too much willpower not to curse aloud as the full repercussions of Dr. Ibanez's condition sunk in. This could be that boy's mother, and his aunt, yet Din felt like he was staring at a dead-end. If he looked hard enough, he could see the Kid in the shape of her nose and the color of her eyes. But she was paler than her sister, and *several* shades lighter than the Kid, her hair thick and dark and kept in a simple, long braid that

hung over her shoulder; no way to tell if the Kid's hair could be similar.

"Six years?" Din repeated. Becca nodded, taking a slow drag. The whole house was faded to a dingy grey. It was all clean, spotlessly so, but it was definitely a chain-smoker's house, the smell of nicotine and tar sunk deep into the carpet and wallpaper and furniture.

"So... you came here to ask her something, right? I doubt it was about her PhD dissertation," Becca said with a hoarse chuckle.

"Project 66," Luke said. His eyes remained on Dr. Ibanez, whose mouth was moving ceaselessly to silent words.

An audience cheered and clapped, a game show theme played, and Becca Ibanez tapped ash into a glass dish with wrinkles forming across her forehead. She sighed softly.

"Figured," Becca told them, staring down at her slowly burning cigarette. "She joined in the sixties. It actually started years before that, back in the fifties or something. But Terri joined because it was supposed to be about... making people *better*. About using the mind to do incredible things."

"Incredible things?" Din repeated. Luke slowly stood back up and got to Din's side, his jaw taut and one hand gently wringing his plastic and metal wrist.

"Like, I dunno, using the power of your mind to move things, lift 'em, to ease pain, heal-"

"Heal?" Luke interrupted, gaze cutting to Teresa. Whose eyes hadn't so much as followed his motions.

"Yeah, and read minds and shit. When Terri joined it was supposed to be all about the good of mankind, but it was just getting crazier, the drugs getting poured into those women, meu Deus. LSD and bunch of psychedelics that hippies would be scared to take. And they had these... isolation tests..."

"Isolation tests?" Luke asked sharply.

“Yeah, these big tanks, bigger than a bathtub,” Becca explained, holding out her hands to display their supposed size. Luke’s brow furrowed, his shaking hand gripping at his prosthetic so hard his knuckles turned white. “They were meant to cut off everything, your senses, any connections. Terri... started to get worried somewhere around the seventies. It kept getting... worse, more dangerous. She let some other things slip, in her letters to me,” she stopped with a smirk at their sudden jerks of surprise. “I burnt them. Sorry, boys.”

Din and Luke exchanged glances, Luke shrugging with a crooked smile.

“They were talking about using... what’s them cells in babies? Stem cells. How they could be more... changeable, able to adapt to the experiments in ways adults couldn’t. Around then she was also talking about this other scientist, a man. M something? Gerald’s?”

“Gideon?” Din prompted. Becca pointed at him.

“That’s the one. A real smooth talker, that one. Terri... she’s not dumb, okay? Not even one of those smart girls who are dumb about the world, not my sister. She was *smart*. But she let that guy talk her into joining the experiments, talk her into a... well, she called it a relationship, but who actually knows. By ‘76, she realized she was pregnant, and she was in *deep*. She tried to get out, me and my parents, we helped her get away, disappear, she was dead certain something bad was gonna happen to him, the baby, I mean. But it was too late...” Becca’s hand shook visibly, the cigarette almost missing her mouth when she raised it. She sucked it down to the filter and dropped it to the tray, smoke billowing out from between trembling lips.

“What do you mean?” Din asked softly.

“She lost the baby. Third trimester.”

“What? The baby...?” Luke said with wide, baffled eyes.

“Yup. She... here, come here,” Becca waved them to follow, leading them down a hallway. The door stuck a bit, but it opened to reveal a nursery. Walls bright green, jungle animals hanging from a mobile

over a beautiful wooden crib, furniture painted with love and detail, tiger eyes glowing among tall grasses, monkey tails swishing below tree limbs, bright blue toucans swooping across drawers. Din walked up to the crib and picked up a large stuffed frog, its limbs limp and long, a wide smile on its face under large glassy eyes. “Grogu’s room. She’s kept it like this, like he’s gonna come home someday. Doctors say it’s a coping mechanism, but she swore... swore until the day she came home like *that* that he was still out there. She had to save him from The Man, the *Man* took him, to use him like a weapon,” Becca explained, fingers curling into air quotes around “the Man”. “Like they did with the other women.”

“Like the other women?” Din asked sharply.

Becca unconsciously straightened as she scowled at his tone. “There weren’t many of them, not by the end, but my sister said all of them gave birth within months of each other, and all the babies disappeared. The women not long after.”

“The names,” Luke muttered. Becca’s eyebrow arched up. “What happened... the day she came back like that?” Luke asked her quickly.

Her cool dark eyes studied him a moment longer. “It was a few years after Gro- the baby was lost. She heard about the new lab in some town nearby, got the insane idea that her baby was there. She broke in. I heard later that... she took a gun.” Her voice stuttered and her hand brushed over her mouth. “I don’t know exactly what happened, but they said she... she had a seizure? And she had a really bad one again in the hospital. Said she was pumped full of those drugs she must’ve hoarded-” Becca broke off, *tsking* loudly. “If I had known... I never thought she would’ve... they said she was gonna take down as many as she could with her. I never would’ve believed it, but... I saw the names. In the paper. Of the people she shot. Shot them dead. To save a baby that was already dead.” Becca’s fingers pressed her mouth and she turned away, unable to hide the bright film of tears in her brown eyes.

Brown eyes like her sister’s... like her nephew’s.

Din’s hand clenched around the frog and his throat burned, squeezed

tight. When he raised his eyes to Luke, he was already staring back, blue gaze burning with barely concealed fury and pain.

“The lab,” Din started hoarsely. “Was it Hawkins Regional Lab?”

Becca inhaled sharply. “Y-yeah. That sounds- that was it, I’m sure.”

“The lawsuits your sister had out... they all settled out of court?”

Becca snorted loudly. “Sure, settled. They were all *dismissed*. We didn’t see a dime, not even when she came home like... like *that*. That slippery *bastard* Gideon said how sorry he was it came to this, promised not to take it out on my family, and he would let it drop if we did. He didn’t say it outright, but I knew if my parents pressed my sister’s suits, he’d ruin us. All my sister’s work, her grants, her money, it’s all gone. All into her care. And my parents died a few years back. All we’ve got, me and Terri, is this house. We were lucky we weren’t run back to Brazil with nothing at all, I guess.”

“This... can I take this?” Din asked, holding up the frog, clearing his throat with a painful snap.

Becca frowned at him, opening her mouth around an automatic refusal, only to break off. “You know what? Take it. If she makes a fuss, I’ll buy another one, but... she’s barely up to leaving that chair these days.”

Din nodded once and tucked the frog into the inner pocket of his jacket. The smile Luke gave him was lopsided and sad, and he patted Din’s arm as he passed and walked out of the room. Becca watched him go, and then looked over to Din curiously.

“That one’s strange.”

“You’ve got no idea,” Din agreed.

In the living room, Luke was kneeling in front of Dr. Ibanez once more, his voice low and urgent. Becca scoffed again, lighting up another cigarette and muttering under her breath about weirdos who don’t know when to quit. But Din could just barely make out Luke’s whispers as he neared. Promises to find Groggu and keep him safe. Din pressed his hand over the lump in his coat and knew the first thing



he'd be doing tonight.

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Since Finn's mom *and* dad couldn't both afford to take the rest of the day off, Dr. Bonteri could only drop the three of them off at Starcruise Park and immediately return to Hawkins Lab. She had told Finn and Rey in the past that she mainly did paperwork, but she also managed multiple scientists and project teams. The amount of times she compared scientists to tiny children with the memory of goldfish, and how raising Finn and Rey were a "cakewalk", was uncountable after years of hearing it. While Mr. Bonteri and Rey went into the house, Dr. Bonteri called Finn to stay back for a quiet word, mother-to-son. Just minutes later, Finn came in, rubbing at his face with the back of his wrist. When Rey met his eyes from across the large, open, living-dining area, he gave her a genuine, if wobbly, smile, and set his backpack next to hers.

"You 'kay?" she whispered.

"Yeah, just Mom telling me they're still proud of me. You know, the usual parent stuff," Finn joked with an overly casual shrug. Rey smiled weakly, her heart too tight, and knocked her shoulder against his.

Mr. Bonteri came into the room, his coat and briefcase gone. "Both of you will do your homework first, then wash up and help me cook dinner when you're done. Will you be able to stay for dinner, Rey?" he asked, reaching out to grip Finn's shoulder with a gentle squeeze, then Rey's; the same heartwarmingly parental touch for both of them.

Rey used to dream about her own parents, clinging to Steela and Lux Bonteri's touches in place of theirs when she was desperate to remember anything real. Rey stared down at her hands, lips rolled together, and nodded.

"Good." Mr. Bonteri rubbed at Finn's head as if to tousle his too-short hair, making Finn bat him away, before heading to the back of the

house. Most likely he was going to make calls to City Hall or some of his colleagues to update them. Both teens pulled out their books reluctantly and began to scribble halfheartedly.

“Are you gonna get in trouble with the old guy and Ochi?” Finn asked quietly, gnawing on the side of his thumb as he glared at his biology book.

Rey shrugged. “Whatever. They’ll have to catch me first. I don’t plan on it.”

“You have to go home *eventually*, Rey,” Finn hissed.

She shrugged again, her jaw tightening and her eyes narrowing. “I’m not gonna just give up trying to find her, Finn. You know that.”

“Yeah, but what can you do? You need money for the plan, and you have to get to the store.”

“I have an idea,” Rey said stubbornly.

“Can I-?”

“No.”

Finn reared back, eyes widening and face stricken. Rey squirmed in her seat. “I just... I don’t want you to get in trouble again. You heard your mom and the principal, you can get kicked off the team if you miss another practice this week.”

“Rey, Rose is more important than that crap.”

“She *is*, but she’ll kill *me* if I let you get kicked off the team and didn’t stop you. Gotta make our goody-goody friend proud, ya know.” Her lips trembled, but she did pull up a smile as she looked over at Finn. He returned it easily, reaching over to entangle their fingers on the table’s surface.

“Keep your walkie-talkie on you. I won’t go to bed until you’re home safe, okay?” Finn said, dropping his voice down to a whisper when Mr. Bonteri came back down the hall, his cuffs unbuttoned and his sleeves rolled up. Rey nodded seriously, squeezed his hand, and they

turned back to their homework.

The outside lights were not yet on with Rey snuck into her bedroom through the window. Her boots barely made a muffled *thump* on her carpet, and her backpack slipped off her shoulder onto the bed. She dumped everything out, books flopping like dead fish to her bedspread, so she could shove in her flashlight, walkie, and as many batteries as she could find. She scrambled under her bed and dug through her drawers to find any change or dollars she might've stashed somewhere. Desperately, cursing under her breath and glancing repeatedly at her door, Rey ransacked her room as quietly as possible with her heart beating too loudly in her ears. By the time she gave up, she barely had five dollars.

She stood in the middle of her room, her almost empty pack hanging from a limp hand, her eyes on the few crumpled bills and pile of old coins lying on her palm. Faintly, she could make out the low murmur of voices and the louder sound of the TV coming from the living room. She could even smell the chicken & rice soup Mr. Bestoon must've made. Her fingers curled around the money and shoved it into her pocket. Time to do something Rose would *not* approve of.

"Sorry, Rose," she whispered, grinning briefly. She tossed her backpack out the window.

Rather than following, she crept towards her door. She pressed against the wall, held her breath, and peered around the doorjamb. The TV light flickered, but the older men were safely in their chairs out of sight. Inhaling sharply through her nose, Rey's boot slid over the carpet, gradually leaning her weight onto her toes. Then, the next foot, painstakingly slow. She grasped the cheap brass doorknob and, with a bracing swallow, slipped into the Old Guy's bedroom. She left it cracked open behind her, turning towards the bureau, only to stop. And *look*. Almost ten years and she'd never been in here.

The bed was tall, bedposts dark, solid wood and carved intricately. Her fingers trembled as she smoothed her hand over the coverlet. It

was so fluffy and soft it dimpled under the slightest pressure, filled with actual *feathers*. It was all solid colors— dark ruby red and creamy white sheets and pillowcases. The mattress was definitely not air, firm and cushion-y when she leaned her weight on it. On the nightstand, there was a Bible, but it looked untouched— the spine not even creased, the gilt edges of the paper gleaming like real gold. The lamp shade was *beautiful*, a pure white barely made grey by dust, delicately embroidered designs in red thread of what looked like bare tree branches... or lightning. Her fingers traced along the thread, barely biting back a gasp at how smooth it was. Was it... *silk*?

She carefully opened the first drawer, deciding that it might be better place than the bureau, and found the drawer filled with... boxes? Rey knelt, glanced over her shoulder, and slowly picked up the first box and lifted the lid. Cigars. An almost full box of cigars, with red and black wrappers, and the name “Cohiba” stamped under the lid. Rey raised a cigar to her nose, inhaling the scent of it with a frown, and—

*‘You said this was infallible, Ochi. You vouched for this man, his work, and now it’s-’*

Rey jerked back, the cigar falling from her fingers. Gritting her teeth, she quickly set it back right and closed the lid, determined to think about that *later*. In between and underneath the boxes, she saw a file. Rey tilted her head, squinting, but she could only make out the edge of a red-ink stamp and a white sticker. It wasn’t money, though, so she tabled that, too, and got back to her feet. With another breathless straining of her hearing towards the living room, she tiptoed to the bureau.

Pay dirt.

There was a shallow glass dish filled with coins, two cuff links, and, best of all, a money clip full of bills. She grabbed it eagerly, thumbing the edges to count... Her eyes widened. They were all twenties. Soft and tattered along the edges with age. There was an easy two hundred here. Her fingers traced the clip, realizing how shiny and heavy it was, how *golden*. Carefully, she pulled out two twenties, shoved them in her pocket, and then set the rest carefully down. Her eye caught on the cuff links again and her index finger touched the

sharp corner of one. They were as shiny yellow as the money clip, with tiny chips of glittering stones set in the middle in the shape of a diamond. She almost laughed out loud when she held them up to see that each tiny stone in the diamond-shape were actual tiny *diamonds*. *Real diamonds*.

She set them back down so quickly, they clinked against the glass and coins. Looking over the bureau, Rey found a thin, flat, box-looking thing that she carefully lifted the lid of. It was a frame, not a box. Two frames, hinged together. On one side, the Old Guy was standing with a young, familiar-looking man. They were both wearing military uniforms, though the Old Guy's had a *lot* more medals, the younger man just had bars for whatever rank he was and a name badge she couldn't quite read in the dim light. His smile was blindly, proud, his hair the usual crew cut looking almost white under his wide, front-brimmed hat, everything looking washed out in the sepia-tone photo. Probably blond then, and his eyes were light, too.

She frowned, wondering what was so familiar about that face, and looked at the other photo absently. She saw a young woman and a young girl, both somber faces made more so by the shorn hair and blank stares. Rey slapped the frames shut. Her mouth was too dry, her brain buzzing without thoughts or words, and she was out of that weirdly beautiful room. Throwing herself into her own room, and out the window where her backpack waited.

There was a deadline for step two of her plan. She didn't have time to question what she'd found in there.

She was clutching her side and wheezing through a stitch as she jogged through the trailer park a long while later. Evening had fully turned to night, the sky pitch-black and the wind chilly on her sweaty face. Most of the trailers and mobile homes still had lit up windows, signs of life going on as normal. Evening shows on TVs changing over to late night shows, music leaking out past thin walls and not-quite-fitted windows. Some older folk were sitting out on their tiny porches or on plastic chairs taking up every inch of astroturf between their

homes, cigarettes glowing red as they gabbed and gossiped and enjoyed the last of the clear, brisk weather before winter truly sunk in its claws.

Rey darted out of sight when she could hear the nosiest of them talking. Kept on going to the quietest and farthest corner of the park. The war may have been behind them, but the feelings of resentment and fear still simmered, and two Vietnamese girls moving into town had been a huge deal at the time. Finding an affordable home had been even harder than it should've been for Californian *urbanites* moving into a backwater nowhere because so many of the realtors and landlords were older and suspicious of anyone who *looked* Vietnamese, let alone actually *were*. So the last trailer in the park, completely out of sight of the front gate, was where they had ended up. Rey always felt guilty over how selfishly grateful she was for that.

She halted in front of the trailer, panting quietly and staring at the yellow tape across the front door. With a twist of her mouth, she went around the side of the building and found Rose's windows. Her too bulky and heavy backpack thudded into the room, and Rey followed it, wriggling and huffing, arms shaking under her own weight. She fell in a wild tangle of limbs, forcing herself up and groaning.

The can of paint popped open and she barely stirred it before slapping brush to wall. Frowning, brows low, Rey wrote out the alphabet in big, bold swatches of dark blue. The nails were a bit more of a problem, her eyes glancing to the hammer and nails, the wall, then to the window and the nearest neighbor. Old Maz was old as Methuselah and blinder than a bat without her glasses, but she wasn't deaf by any means. Rey used the fewest she possibly could, pressing the nails into the faux-wood paneling with her whole weight rather than just banging the nails in. The lights were unpacked and unraveled next, each strand connected to the next, and she went out into the hallway, plugged in the first light to an outlet in the kitchen, then unfurled the whole mass of them. She took down photos to use the nails already there to hang the lights, crisscrossing the hallway into Rose's room, where she hung a line of lights above each line of letters of the alphabet. The last half foot or so of lights she let puddle

onto the ground next to the outlet by Rose's desk. Finally she plugged them in. Green, yellow, blue, and red lit up every inch of Rose's room and down the hallway.

"I'm here, Rose. Come on, please be here, *please*," Rey called out, not quite a shout, slowly sinking onto the bed. Her hands fell limply between her knees and she stared at her alphabet wall and the sloppy, still wet letters. She got up and rooted out her flashlight and walkie-talkie, changed the batteries, and settled down again, the walkie crackling in her hands and the flashlight off. Under her breath she repeated "*come on come on come on*", every muscles pulled tight under her skin.

The crackling shuddered and the flashlight blinked. Rey jumped, and stared, but no voice came from the walkie. The flashlight flashed steadily, then went out. Almost robotically, Rey leaned over and jerked the lights out of the plug. The room plunged into darkness, until a light on the wall, over the H, blinked yellow. Then, the I.

"Hi," Rey worked out past numb lips. She got up, shuffled over, and lay her shaking fingers over the navy-blue I. "Rose?"

Y E S

Rey grinned and pressed her forehead to the wall. "I knew it. I knew you'd be here."

H I D I N G

"Yeah... yeah." Rey inhaled, and, on the exhale, laughed weakly. "Okay, so where is it? The thing?"

D O N T K N O

"Do you... do you still have the gun? Paige said-"

Y E S

"Okay, good, so-"

I T S F A S T

“All you need to do it slow it down and *run*, don’t be a hero.”

T H A T S U

Rey let out a wobbly chuckle. “No, not really. I stole money from the Old Guy tonight. Not much of a hero.”

S H U T U P

This time the laugh was loud, breaking through the heavy darkness better than the Christmas lights she’d bought in bulk.

“Okay, look, there has to be a door, right? Somehow you got there? Was there a door here? In your house?”

Y E S G O N E N O W

“*How?* There has to be another door because that... that *thing* gets out!”

I C A N T G E T P A S T

I T E A T S

A cold chill, very much like the wind outside, slicked down Rey’s spine, clutched the inside of her throat.

“Eats? It... eats *what?*”

A C O P

The tired sheriff, the weird energy in the sheriff’s office, how much everyone worked, the new faces patrolling the streets... It *ate a fucking cop?*

P L U T T

Bile burned the back of Rey’s throat, her nose, her eyes stinging, and she raced to the bathroom, lights trailing behind her. She gagged and coughed over the sink, the spaghetti she’d helped to make splattering like blood in the bowl, and she heaved again. Water poured into the porcelain, and tears and snot tickled and burned down her face as she



scrubbed with shaking, numb hands. It was barely cleaned, but she yanked the faucet off and rubbed her damp hands on her jeans. She glanced into the mirror, the splatters of water, the deathly pallor of her own face.

“Oh my *god*, Rose, I have to get you out of there,” she whispered, hoarse and dry from bile.

There was silence, and darkness, and the creeping cold feeling got colder, more tangible, and then-

Every light in the house went crazy, a holly jolly disco sickening in its frantic speed, flashing and racing along the wires, lighting up and going out and lighting up. Rey stumbled back a few steps, mouth gaping as she stared around her. She made it back to the room, gripping the doorjamb. The lights over three letters began to blink, again and again againagainag-

R

U

N

“Wh-” The flashlight on the floor began to flicker. There was a pounding. A pounding on the wall behind the letters. Rey stepped forward, hand reaching out to touch the wall beside the R.

*Rey Rey*

“Rose?” Rey whispered. She could hear her. The panicked screaming. “Rose!” The wall thudded harder, rippled as if a whole body had thrown itself against it, and Rey flinched.

Every light went out.

Rey gasped, her arm twitched where it was still raised. The steady blink blink blink of the streetlamp lit Rose’s room. Every moment seemed slowed, her body moving like a flipbook.

Something moved. Shifting under the wooden panelling like snakes under sand, or a creeping hand under a blanket. It began to stretch

outward, towards her, thin, sharp points clawing through the skin-like membrane of the wall.

A scream was caught in her throat, her eyes burning and wide. Something that was like a hand but so so so *not* a hand began to rip through. The wall *goosed* under the pulling, pushing, *clawing*.

Rey stumbled back, tripped onto her ass, scuttled backwards as the hole tore open. As that eerie icy *cold* ballooned into *this side*, into Rose's room. A room that was too real, too *mundane* for the thing that tore out of the melting wall.

Huge, deceptively thin fingers as sharp as knives scratched over the floor, taloned feet following, a hunched over greyish purplish *alien* thing stretched, like a cat after a nap, then standing, like a man, shoulders rolling back, head rising, and there wasn't—

Rey was gone, hands and boots scrabbling to catch hold, to push up, to *run*. It didn't matter she'd jogged most of the way into town and back for those damn lights, that her ribs still felt bruised climbing in and out of windows. She ran and *ran*. Faster than she ever had before as something *wrongwongsowrong* roared at her back, as claws scraped and the weight of whatever it was thudded with each step. It was fast. Fucking *fast*. Only the doorway, and the narrow hall, slowed it down, its ungainly body smashing against the walls and floor. She flung herself out of the house, grabbed the railing around the porch, and vaulted over it. Her boots slipped over astroturf, her hands stung as she caught her balance on gravel, and she ran on, ignoring the twinge in her ankles, the burn in her lungs.

Arms wrapped around her and she screamed, flailing wildly, fingers curled like claws. Hands caught her wrists and the voice broke through Rey's panic.

"Rey! Rey, calm down, it's just me! It's Paige, what the hell, Rey, *calm down*," Paige yelled, getting both wrists in one of her hands and the other arm wrapping around Rey, pulling her close and tucking her under Paige's chin.

Rey froze, panting like a wild animal, eyes scanning everywhere.

But the roaring and snarling was gone. Only the wind and the rumbling of the old sedan Paige had left running outside the trailer. Paige rocked her slowly, patting the back of her head, hushing her quietly.

"It's okay. There's no one here. Just us. It's okay, Rey." Rey gulped and nodded, her arms lifting to wrap around Paige's waist. "What were you *doing* in there?"

"R-Rose. Looking for Rose."

"Rey, you shouldn't have..." Paige stopped in the middle of her quiet sigh, cupped Rey's sweaty, wan face, and frowned. "What happened? Did you- is Rose in there?" Paige glared at the door, her shoulders rigid and lips pulled into a thin line.

"No." Rey gulped hard and slowly turned to stare at the door. Nothing moved. The lights inside remained dark. The streetlamp glowed steady and warm. Paige's hands rubbed up and down Rey's arms. "No, she's not."

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Gravel spattered the sides of the SUV and dust settled around the wheels. Din jerked the Blazer into park and let the silence draw out, his mouth too dry to speak. At his side, Luke stared at Karga's brightly lit windows. Slowly, his head turned and his eyebrows went up.

"Why did you bring me to Sheriff Karga's, Din?"

Din's heart pounded as he stared through dark lenses at the house. A familiar shadow moved inside, a curtain rustling as Karga's face peeked out and disappeared. Din heaved a sigh.

"You know that kid?" Din said hesitantly, a hand on the lump in his coat. "The Ibanez boy-"

"Oh, you son of a-" Luke pushed out of the SUV, landing with a

thump and loud snap of the door before Din could finish. Din was out and running around the front of the Blazer within the next second, grabbing Luke's arm and holding him back. Luke turned on him, and, even in the dusk, his eyes were blazing. "Are you *kidding* me, Din?"

"I didn't know what else to do, Luke. There was something weird about it, about Kuil, about this kid. He just showed up in my house and... the things he can do, Luke. I..." Din broke off, his hand tightened on Luke's bicep until he took a soft inhale and let his hand drop. "He was scared, and he needed me. I had to keep him safe." There was no point in bringing up Leia, or the CIA card in his pocket, not yet. *This* had been his own decision, to keep Luke in the dark, before Leia had walked in his door.

Luke looked away. Silence fell again, and, thankfully, Karga stayed inside. Either he was doing as he promised keeping the Kid under his direct supervision, or he could *feel* the tension building outside, taut as a wire and just as ready to snap.

But then it didn't.

Luke exhaled, hard, his chest and shoulders visibly heaving, before he dragged his flesh hand through his hair, tousling it himself wildly.

"The night you wouldn't let me in your house, the person inside...?"

"Him. The Kid."

Luke's eyes darting over Din's face, the lowered brow and glasses refracting the steady glow of Karga's porch light, the tense jaw. Then, Luke huffed, lips twitching upwards.

"I can't believe I got jealous of Omera and it was you being *noble* and protecting a kid. Of course it was, damn, I'm an idiot." Luke tipped forward, ducking his head to laugh ruefully.

"So you were."

Luke looked up, chuckling and shaking his hair away from his eyes. "What?"

"Jealous," Din said.

Luke's laughter cut off as he glanced away, rubbing the back of his neck. "So, uh, let's go meet this Grogue Ibanez," he suggested quickly after clearing his throat. He strode towards Karga's porch, pace swift and shoulders stiff, as Din followed, his mouth curling upwards.

Karga swung open the door, his broad body blocking the interior and his arms crossing his chest. He looked from Luke, whose face was suspiciously flushed, to Din right behind him.

"Hey, son. Bit late for a visit," Karga said slowly, the question clear behind his words.

"Not a visit. Luke helped me out today. With the Kid."

Karga stared Luke down. Luke grinned back sunnily.

"I'm very helpful!"

"I'll bet," Karga said with a snort. But he stepped back and let the two men enter. "I got a different impression this morning-"

"We cleared things up. How is he?" Din interrupted impatiently. He could hear something... crackling and fuzzing somewhere in the house. When he stepped into the living room, all he found was the drawing pad and the crayons scattered over the floor, the Kid nowhere in sight. He squatted down, taking off his shades at last to peer down at the sheer amount of *black* along the edges of every page.

"He was doing fine. 'Bout to eat me outta house and home, but good. Quiet. Nothing woo-hoo that I saw," Karga said, waggling his fingers.

"Woo-hoo?" Luke repeated, eyebrows in danger of disappearing in his hairline.

"Din said he was a bit special. Only thing I noticed was he didn't like using words, caught him flapping his hands around, but I don't know sign language, so I'll be dam- *durned* if I know what he was saying," Karga explained.

"Sign language?" Luke repeated softly. He looked down the hallway, his gaze sharp and his head tilted like a bird's. But Din was focused

on the drawing pad, flipping through page after page of black and red crayon drawings. Sometimes there was a small brown box, strange looking letters pouring out of it. Luke leaned over, hand on Din's shoulder, and his fingers dug in sharply. "That's Russian."

"What?" Din jerked his head up, but Luke was already walking past, his expression eerily blank. "Luke?"

He scrambled to follow, Karga right behind him, and that crackling, the stuttering *sssshhhh*, getting louder. In a small room, that had maybe once been a closet, the Kid was sitting in front of Karga's old police radio, an oil-stained and tattered tartan rag tied around his head, blood slipping down his lip. Luke was at his side, his flesh hand slowly cupping the Kid's face, whispering rapidly, as whimpers fell from the Kid's mouth.

"Shit, what—" Karga blurted. Din's hand pressed to Karga's chest to stop him, his mouth pulled into a thin white line as his eyes fell on the radio.

There were more than whimpers coming from just the *Kid*. The whimpers were coming from the radio.

And they sounded a *lot* like a girl.

Across the small room, Luke looked up. His pupils had dilated so wide the blue of them had been swallowed up by black and his mouth formed the name: *Rose*.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

If you don't follow me on tumblr: my usual guy who reads my chapters before I post them just... never read/finished this chapter. When I finally told him I WAS GONNA post and he needed to finish, he told me he was just "a casual reader" anyway and I should post without him. So. Yeah, that happened. I put out a post on tumblr for help and got a few replies.

But mainly it took so long, and I didn't put my foot down for four weeks, because I'm working on an

original novel. I don't think the publishing opportunity is going to go through, but I did spend the past three-four weeks in talks with a company that was middling interested in what I had. I was in a constant cycling state of anxiety, euphoria, and burn out the whole time. (I also took this weekend to do nothing but watch a kdrama with my friend in America to just relax. For srs, go watch Goblin or Guardian: The Great and Lonely God, so good.) BUT I'M BACK and working on Chapter Thursday this week!